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Caste, protest and
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Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India

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Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India

The Namasudras of Bengal,
1872–1947

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay

CURZON

For Srilekha

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Abbreviations

ADPI	Additional Director of Public Instruction
AICC	All India Congress Committee
BLAP	Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings
BLCP	Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
BPKS	Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha
CI	Chief Inspector
DC	District Census Report
DG	District Gazetteer
DM	District Magistrate
DPI	Director of Public Instruction
Divn.	Division
FR	Fortnightly Report
GB	Government of Bengal
GEB & A	Government of East Bengal and Assam
GI	Government of India
IOL	India Office Library
MR	Monthly Report
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
OC	Officer-in-charge
Offcg	Officiating
PS	Police Station
Progs.	Proceedings
RNNP(B)	Report on Native Newspapers (Bengal)
RNNP(EB&A)	Report on Native Newspapers (Eastern Bengal & Assam)
SDO	Sub-Divisional Officer
SP	Superintendent of Police

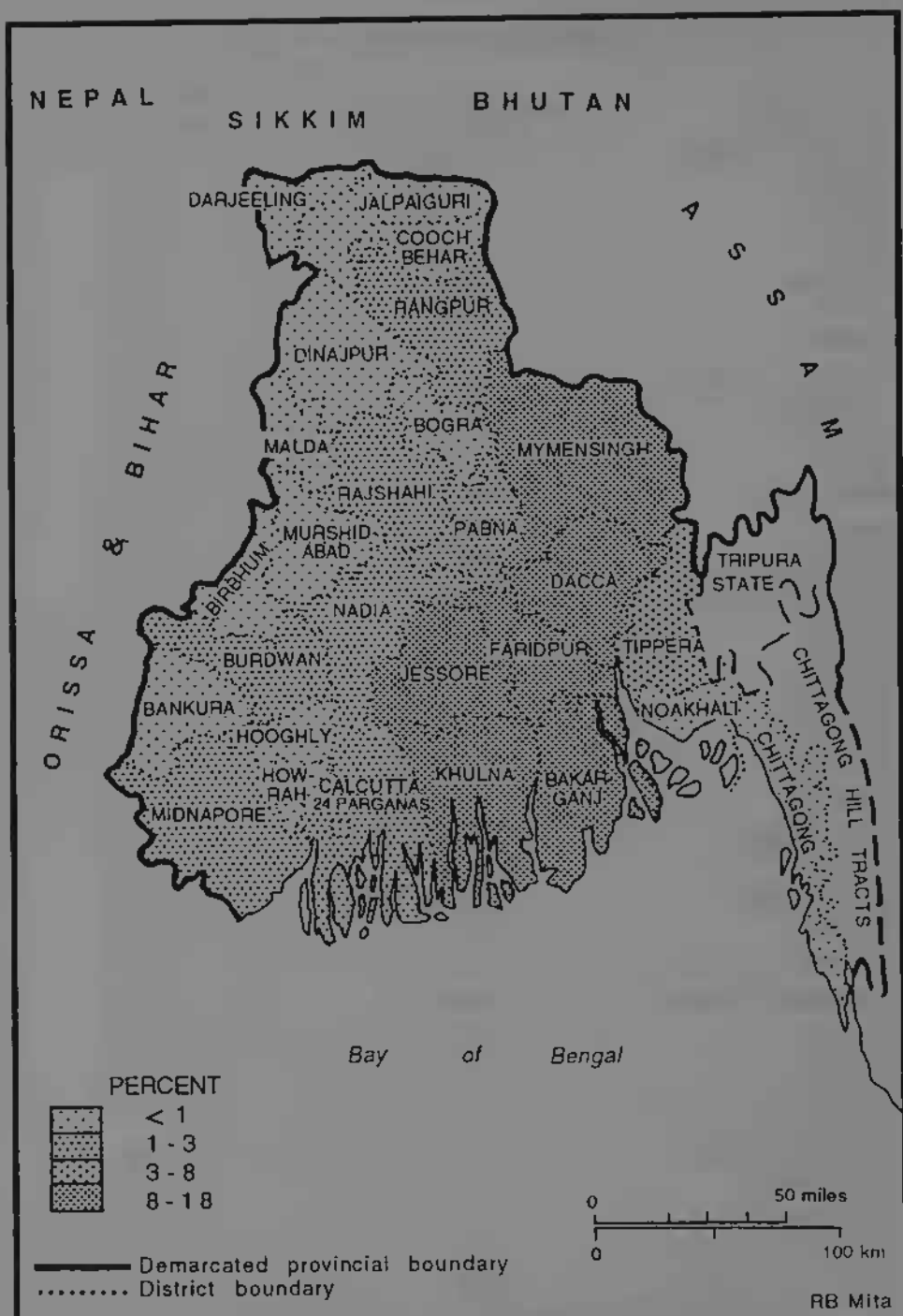
SR	Survey and Settlement Report
Secy.	Secretary
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives
WR	Weekly Report

Table Distribution of Namasudra population in Bengal (1901)

<i>Division/District</i>	<i>Total population</i>	<i>Percentage to provincial total</i>
Burdwan Division	79,144	4.25
Burdwan	18,960	1.01
Birbhum	1,839	0.09
Bankura	1,364	0.07
Midnapore	36,857	1.98
Hooghly	9,822	0.52
Howrah	10,302	0.55
Presidency Division	44,091	23.91
24-Parganas	24,715	1.32
Calcutta	1,313	0.07
Nadia	37,695	2.02
Murshidabad	16,028	0.86
Jessore	174,835	9.39
Khulna	190,507	10.23
Rajshahi Division	132,867	7.13
Rajshahi	28,218	1.51
Dinajpur	5,048	0.27
Jaipalguri	2,558	0.13
Darjeeling	156	—
Rangpur	39,792	2.13
Bogra	7,901	0.42
Pabna	49,194	2.64
Dacca Division	1,033,748	55.55
Dacca	235,542	12.65
Mymensingh	155,883	8.37
Faridpur	324,135	17.41
Bakarganj	318,188	17.09
Chittagong Division	145,892	7.83
Tippera	115,413	6.20
Noakhali	27,452	0.95
Chittagong	3,021	0.16
Chittagong Hill Tracts	6	—
Feudatory States	8,543	0.45
Cooch Bihar	5,035	0.27
Hill Tippera	3,508	0.18
Provincial Total*	1,80,914	—

* The Provincial total also included those living in Bihar and Orissa; within this region, Purnea and Malda districts contained some Namasudra population, 11,362 and 3,198 respectively.

Source: *Census of India*, 1901, Vol. VIA, Part II, Table XIII



Map Distribution of Namasudra population in Bengal, 1901

Introduction

I

The caste question in recent years has once again been prominently repositioned in India's national political agenda. The publication of the Mandal Commission Report and the subsequent adoption of its recommendations by the central and various state governments, causing a violent Hindu caste backlash, have raised serious questions about the implications of caste consciousness for the secular nature of Indian society and polity. When the forward march of Hindu fundamentalism was stalled in the 1993 UP election by an alliance of the Scheduled Castes and the Other Backward Classes,¹ it convinced many that caste itself can provide a basis for modernisation and struggle against communalism and hierarchical order in contemporary Indian society.² But on the other hand, the angry higher caste students setting themselves on fire on the streets of Delhi, the series of anti-reservation riots, culminating in the regionalist Uttarkhand movement in Uttar Pradesh,³ have raised legitimate apprehensions about the divisive impact of articulated caste consciousness threatening the integrity of the nation.⁴ At this juncture, therefore, it is perhaps essential to revisit the question of caste identity and have a fresh look at its nature and impact on the nation building process. This process, during the last fifty years of colonial rule, constantly tried to reconcile, though not always with commendable success, Indian pluralism with the realities of a struggle against foreign domination and control. It is this history of identity formation in the late colonial period, an analysis of the real nature of caste identities, and the protest and politics associated with them, that can tell us how effectively the caste problem can be resolved – if there is a political will to resolve it – in contemporary India.

As for the colonial period, it is now common knowledge, confirmed by

nearly all recent writings on the nationalist movement in India, that there were substantial sections within the indigenous society which had little concern for what has been described as the central contradiction of this period, i.e., between the colonised and their colonisers.⁵ The nationalist movement in this context appears to have remained to a large extent a Hindu high caste affair, Gandhi's intervention bringing in some changes, but failing to alter the situation radically. The earlier nationalist historiography, with an *a priori* assumption of an ideological hegemony of nationalism, almost completely ignored this phenomenon,⁶ while some more recent historians have tried to explain it either as a failure of mobilisation⁷ or as a manifestation of passivity of the subaltern groups.⁸ A few works in the last few years have also indicated the necessity of exploring the mentality of such marginal groups as the lower caste Hindus,⁹ or the Muslims,¹⁰ who had developed in the nineteenth century their own social identities, which were in many cases distinct from, and sometimes even opposed to, that of the 'nation'. Their construction of a new collective self and efforts at self-affirmation reflected their own perceptions of the power relations in colonial society and of their location within it. From this emanated their own definition of colonial rule, which in some cases differed substantially from that of the mainstream nationalists. But as the earlier historiography had taken the nation for granted, some of the recent works also have tended to take an essentialist position about the existence of well-defined and distinctive lower caste identities and their permanent disjunction from that of the nation, dominated as it was by the high caste Hindus. The position trivialises both fissions within the former and overlapping of the two.

The social awakening and political movements among some of the ritually lower castes in India in the nineteenth century are now well-known phenomena, interpreted in the existing literature mainly in two different ways. According to some, these movements were the results of economic prosperity and social ambitions of some upwardly mobile communities, or more precisely of their elite leaders, who were looking for higher ritual positions in keeping with their newly improved secular status.¹¹ In the first stage of their movement they aimed only at acquiring the symbols of high status. But in the second, their attention shifted to the more material sources of high status, i.e., education, employment and political power.¹² The problem with this analytical framework is that it ignores completely the element of protest involved in all such movements. The lower caste leaders, at least in their overt assertion, were trying to appropriate certain symbols of authority in order to divest them of their symbolic significance, and were protesting against the

iniquitous distribution of power and economic opportunities. The ideological hegemony of the constituted order, it is true, had set limits to their imagination and ultimately led to the co-option of the more advanced sections among these lower castes. This phenomenon, it may be argued, weakened to a large extent their social protest; but that would hardly justify its total non-recognition.

Other historians, however, have seen only deprivation and protest in such caste movements. Built-up resentments against the implications of social inferiority resulted, according to them, in all such caste agitations, which were therefore expressions of protest against social and economic oppressions, and were thought to be a means to end them all.¹³ The 'reformist' and 'conservative trends' notwithstanding, these movements have been identified as 'anti-systemic movements', seeking 'to transform the basic structure of the Indian social system'.¹⁴ In some cases again, as it has been claimed, one can even detect attempts to turn the constituted order upside down.¹⁵ At the level of organised politics, their exclusion from all sorts of political rights gave a particular shape to their movement; their opposition to mainstream nationalism was not anti-nationalism as such. What they were looking for was a nation based on the principle of 'substantive', rather than 'nominal' citizenship that was being offered by the Congress.¹⁶

Both these explanations are, however, based, with of course varying degrees of emphasis, on the same fundamental assumption that a caste represented an undifferentiated group of people who were located in the same social situation, enjoyed the same quality of life, shared the same social consciousness, or at least behaved in a uniform way, allowing their leaders to manipulate them into conformity. This assumption of a monolith is, however, problematic, as during the colonial period all over India almost every caste, despite their common ritual rank, had become differentiated in terms of economic and social status. If census occupation data are to be trusted as indicators of certain broad general trends, though not as faithful reflections of actual social realities,¹⁷ then even in the early twentieth century (1901-31) we would find social mobility being fairly restricted and sizeable sections of the population still remaining in their hereditary caste occupations, indicating a differential impact of development on the various caste groups. Economic mobility, in other words, though there was some, was certainly not corporate and as a result, class lines could be found to be cutting across the caste boundaries. This phenomenon in a significant way conditioned the consciousness of the various caste groups and consequently had a profound impact on their movements. This fact of

differentiation, though recognised in a number of empirical studies, has not so far been properly related to the dynamics of their social awakening and political movements.

Caste movements, as this work argues, originated neither solely from prosperity, nor from deprivation alone, and they were not the exclusive expressions of either ambition or protest. Nor was caste identity just a 'symbolic capital' to be invested or manipulated by some crafty politicians for their own political aggrandisement.¹⁸ The situation was a little more complex: in a single caste movement we may find a convergence of various trends reflecting the plurality of a group that had been united in common action through some shared goals or experiences. It was perhaps only when such a convergence occurred that a community could be constructed, in the sense that its boundaries could be more sharply defined. This usually took place through a complicated process and due to multiple influences, which brought into sharper focus the commonality among that particular group of people, i.e., their low ritual status – and this articulated their collective 'self'. The community then invented its own traditions. It created its own myths and heroes, and used various symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, to give a concrete shape to this collective identity. Attempts at self-affirmation by such submerged groups involved them in conflicts, both violent and non-violent, with those who enjoyed social authority and so were used to being revered. Such conflicts further marked out the lines of demarcation separating the community from its Other.

But over-emphasis on such conflicts often deflects our attention from the less dramatic moments of accommodation and/or disintegration of the bonds of community and of its social protest. In other words, convergence of the various streams of consciousness, of multiple ambitions and grievances of the various sections within a caste at a particular historical conjuncture, did not necessarily preclude the possibility of divergence or fissuring of the community at a subsequent stage. This might take place due to increasing differentiation within a caste, rendering the ideological hegemony of its leadership ineffective, or due to the unfolding of qualitatively different socio-political processes that might result in the redrawing of social boundaries and articulation of other forms of identities within the same group. If we look just at a particular historical conjuncture – a moment of convergence – then any caste or community would appear as a static monolith. But if we set it in motion or observe it as it was actually involved in a movement over a longer historical period, then the mutations in the community formation process would also come into sharper focus. These would negate the

common assumptions of static or unchanging homogeneity of community identities, which indeed kept on being constantly regrouped and redefined during the colonial period, with changes in their social contexts. This is not to deny, in other words, the putative corporate status of castes, but to argue that it was contextual and not timeless.

II

This study will attempt to show how, through a protest movement, a community identity was constructed by a loosely organised group of people in Bengal who began to call themselves Namasudras since the late nineteenth century. It will also attempt to show how eventually by the middle of the next century their movement gradually disintegrated and merged into the other dominant political streams in the country. This particular movement deserves our attention, for not only was it the most powerful among all the Scheduled Caste movements in colonial Bengal, but when a distinct Scheduled Caste politics emerged in this province in the early twentieth century, it was this community which provided it with the necessary leadership as well as its major support base. The history of the Namasudra movement, therefore, is in many ways also the history of Scheduled Caste politics in general in Bengal. Furthermore, the Namasudras, indeed the entire community – the second largest Hindu caste in the province of Bengal and the largest group among the Hindu agriculturists in its eastern parts – more or less consistently remained alienated from nationalist politics until about the end of the 1930s and this, as all historians of Bengal would agree, weakened the Congress-led nationalist movement in this province almost in the same way as Muslim breakaway politics.¹⁹ It is essential, therefore, to know why this particular group of people initially rejected nationalism, but failed ultimately to maintain their separate political existence and integrated eventually into the political mainstreams in the 1940s.

The Namasudras lived mainly in the marshy tracts of eastern Bengal. Earlier known by a common denigrating generic term of Chandala, a unified caste identity was not a given thing for them, as they were divided into a number of endogamous sub-castes, with low but differentiated social status and restrictions on social interaction. Classified under a common caste name by the colonial ethnographers, these various sub-castes of fishing and boating people of eastern Bengal gradually started to unify themselves, as they underwent a profound physical transformation during the nineteenth century. From an

amphibious existence as boatmen and fishermen, they emerged as a settled peasant community by taking advantage of land reclamations of this period. But in these areas where they tilled the soil, land was still monopolised by the high caste Hindus and better class Muslims. As a result, in their case, their low ritual status coincided by and large with their subordinate class position. A tiny minority among them had, however, improved their economic condition through land holding, education and profession. But despite economic mobility, they still had to share the same experience of social humiliation and disability. Thus by the end of the nineteenth century, the Namasudras had emerged as a settled, but disgruntled, peasant community, with an up and pushing group to provide it with the necessary leadership to launch a social protest movement. They constructed now what Sandria Freitag has recently called an 'ideological community' that would submerge the inchoate class distinctions within the group and set it against its Other.²⁰

This temporary resolution of class conflicts within the community is, however, problematic and needs to be addressed seriously. The small group among the Namasudras, who had moved up economically, were not strong enough to lose their social ties with the less fortunate majority to whom they were still related through the bonds of caste, kinship and religion. In the consciousness of the vast Namasudra peasant population as well, these people who had risen from the same circumstances, were still considered to be dear and near, as opposed to the high caste Hindu gentry, clearly representing an outside economic and social control. By way of explaining Muslim communalism in terms of agrarian relations in eastern Bengal, it has been suggested by Partha Chatterjee that 'Muslim rent-receivers, where they did exist, were considered part of peasant community where as Hindu zamindars and talukdars were not.'²¹ The same argument can perhaps be used to explain the emergence of a community consciousness among the Namasudras as well. But there were differences too, as caste identity for them was not a given thing in the same sense as religious identity was in the case of the Muslims.

The Namasudra elites, to use the term in the absence of a better one to identify the group of wealthy people within this group, had been acceptable to the masses as they were of much smaller size than even the Muslim rent-receivers. Secondly, the income differential between the Namasudra peasantry on the one hand, and this relatively more prosperous minority on the other, was probably much less than that between their counterparts among the Muslims. To this may be added the fact that income and status distinction between the Namasudra peasantry and their more well-off caste brothers was relatively

insignificant compared with that between the former and the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* of the region. For, there still existed a gulf of difference, both in terms of economic status and social position, between the latter and the Namasudra big peasants and tenure holders, occupying usually the bottom layer of an elaborate tenurial structure. Even those who had been educated and gone into higher professions were numerically so small and socially, as well as politically, so unintegrated with the high caste Hindu educated community, because of their low ritual position, that they could not evolve a separate social identity to cut off their ties with the peasant society they came from. On the other hand, their newly acquired secular social status made them more conscious of their paradoxical social position, especially of the anomaly involved in their performing caste irrelevant roles, but still enjoying caste ascribed ritual status. Therefore, at least until the 1930s, they remained effectively integrated into the majority of the Namasudra agriculturalists. These agriculturalists had gradually developed since the closing years of the nineteenth century an articulate, sometimes even militant, caste consciousness, that eventually affected social relations and electoral politics in Bengal. A loose agglomerate of endogamous occupational sub-castes, also differentiated according to economic status, very consciously transformed themselves into a *community* with a carefully constructed caste identity shared by all. The Namasudra case would show that community identity is a historical phenomenon, and not a given or natural thing. On the other hand, it is not just a manipulated identity either, ethnicised or substantialised by the elites for building up their political support base.

It was an ideology of protest that defined the collective identity of such politicised castes as the Namasudras and distinguished them from their Other, i.e., the high caste Hindu gentry, whose oppression and exploitation all of them were determined to resist, albeit in different ways. Their protest was rarely open or violent, and represented more what James C. Scott would call a 'hidden transcript'.²² It was through such everyday forms of protest against the existing power relations that the community gradually constructed and politicised itself for a more open resistance, though non-violent and constitutional, against the dominant power elites of Bengali Hindu society. However, we should also remember that this ideology of protest, which bounded the community together, had been conceptualised within the context of domination and it could not therefore escape the hegemonic influence of the dominant ideology of Hinduism.²³ The idioms of subversion were taken straight from the discourses of domination and the mentality of

protest was often accompanied by preparedness to accommodate and accept. Partha Chatterjee has recently conceded 'that subaltern consciousness is not merely structure, characterised solely by negativity; it is also history, shaped and developed through a changing process of interaction between the dominant and the subordinate'. But while he sees in this history the 'practical defeat' of a 'spirit of resolute negativity',²⁴ we will argue about the limits of resistance itself. The caste orientated concepts of status and the associated conditions of labour were indeed enforced as much by consent and acceptance as by coercion.²⁵ The *protest* of the Namasudras, as this study will reveal, was situated in a continuum of hidden resistance, open revolt and accommodative behaviour.

Unlike Freitag's 'ideological community', assumed to have been permanently imagined for the Muslims of north India,²⁶ the Namasudra community identity underwent a constant process of change, ultimately ending up in fracturing and fragmentation and the particles that fell apart being appropriated by other wider identities, such as nation, religion or class. What this phenomenon indicates is that, community identity, which was not a given thing, could be imagined in one context and also de-imagined in another. The Namasudras' subsequent integration into various other political streams, such as Congress-led nationalism, or the Hindu Mahasabha-instigated communalism or the Communist-inspired peasant protests, was therefore nothing unnatural and indeed rooted in the logic of their movement itself, which was never separatist *per se*. The different constituents of the community had been seeking in different ways to reorientate the relations of power in indigenous society. From the very beginning, therefore, different levels of consciousness and varied forms of action could be detected in the same movement. While the Namasudra elites desired a share of new economic opportunities and political power, as it was gradually devolved in institutional politics through successive constitutional reforms, the peasantry cared more for community honour and liberation from economic oppression and social discrimination. The relationship between the two segments of the community had been symbiotic, rather than antagonistic, as all of them had axes to grind against the dominant elites of the society, i.e., the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* gentry of Bengal. This is not to argue, however, that this solidarity, achieved at the turn of the century, was entirely functional. But the emotive issue of protest against continuing social humiliation, experienced in different ways, was as real as any other motive in the collective mentality of the group. This solidarity, however, could not sustain itself for long, as the context within

which it had been constructed began to change. As for the Namasudra elites, their goal had always been to secure a position of power within the wider community, i.e., the nation. They soon found this position secured by the constitutional reform of 1935 which compelled all the nationalist parties to recognise their position, and so the barriers against their integration into the nation were also removed. Consequently, they lost interest in the protest of the lower classes. The latter could therefore no longer look at their community, now under an alienated and disinterested leadership, as an alternative source of power to negotiate with their dominant adversaries. They too looked for new alignments and affiliations and the other more powerful political streams could therefore easily appropriate their movement in the 1940s.

The story of this construction and disintegration of the Namasudra community, the rise and decline of their movement, has been narrated here in a chronological structure. In any discussion of a caste movement, as Georges Duby has argued while discussing the history of heresy in Europe, 'chronology is necessary', as it can 'show historically its upsurges of vitality, and conversely its periods of relaxation and somnolence'.²⁷ The story here begins from 1872, not because it was the year of the first census operation in India, which tended to transform amorphous social categories like religion and caste into enumerated, and thereby objectified, communities.²⁸ The year is more significant in this specific context because it witnessed the first organised social protest of the Namasudras against their degraded social status, indicating thereby the significance of endogenous factors, other than colonial inducements, in stimulating lower caste protest in India. From this particular event in Bakarganj-Faridpur area we may trace the story of construction of a Namasudra community identity, the Swadeshi period (1905-11) being its high point of solidarity. The unity then eroded gradually as their movement plunged more deeply into constitutional politics in the 1930s. It disappeared completely by the 1940s when new identities emerged and new alignments were made in anticipation of an imminent transfer of power. This resulted in the Narmasudra's appropriation by the other more dominant political streams in the country: while some of the leaders remained with Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation, others joined the Congress; the peasants sometimes rallied with the Hindu Mahasabha against the Muslims, on other occasions participated in militant protests under the leadership of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha. The partition of 1947, by dividing the community geographically and uprooting many from their territorial anchorage, finally destroyed the Namasudra's caste-orientated movement. Their caste identity was

not, of course, totally eradicated; but it was caught up in the webs of other overlapping or cross-cutting relationships, both ritual and secular.

This particular case study also indicates the transient nature of caste identity in India. 'Caste', as it appears, was not always a natural social formation, or the essential element in India's social organisation. It was, to borrow a phrase from Nicholas Dirks, a 'cultural construction of power'.²⁹ It may be argued further, by stretching that definition a little more, that since it was a cultural construct, it tended to change continually to reflect the actual relations of power in society. This implies dynamism, a process of constant change, though seldom effected through violent commotion. In colonial India, castes were sometimes constructed through the intervention of colonial ethnographers, legitimated by the superior power of the state. Often they were also invented by the indigenous people to manifest a mentality of protest or a consciousness to interrogate the existing relations of power. But protests or rebellions did not often lead to revolution. For, between resistance and collaboration there would always be a vast middle ground where people, even among the most exploited untouchables, would prefer to conform to dominant cultural ethos of the society and desire to be integrated into it. Even the protests, which were in most cases defined in terms of the existing cultural idioms, were either gradually co-opted by the hegemonic order or were eventually marginalised into trivial existence. This led to fracturing of caste solidarities on class lines, with the upwardly mobile sections among the lower castes gradually being accommodated into the dominant power structure. Caste identities thus continually formed and disintegrated through constant processes of fission and fusion. Caste movements gathered momentum and then dissipated, as castes themselves hardly remained static or homogeneous. This book tries to capture this process of change through the study of a particular caste that journeyed from fusion to fission, from protest to accommodation, from alienation to integration in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal.

Chapter 1

The Namasudras: A Socio-Economic Profile

I

The etymology of the word 'Namasudra', which is not mentioned in any of the pre-nineteenth-century medieval Bengali literature, is extremely uncertain. Colonial ethnologists like James Wise and Herbert Risley believed that it was derived either from the Sanskrit word *namas* or adoration or the Bengali word *namate*, i.e., below or underneath.¹ In the first case it would mean those who were bound to show obeisance even to the Sudras. In the second case, the word would perhaps mean a lower grade of Sudras, a status the Chandalas of Manu had gained promotion to. But these two explanations appear to be highly improbable in view of the new sense of self-respect associated with the Namasudra identity. The Namasudras themselves were also confused about the meaning of the term. Sashi Kumar Badoi Biswas thought that the word *Namah* could mean two things: *namaskar* or paying obeisance to and *tyajya* or to be avoided. If the word was used in the first sense, then it would mean those who paid obeisance to the Sudras (*Sudrang namati*). But if it was used in the second sense, then it would mean avoided by the Sudras (*Namah Sudrena*). None of the meanings, however, seemed to be acceptable to him, though he failed to arrive at a definitive conclusion. According to another Namasudra commentator, Naresh Chandra Das, the word means the best among the Sudras who were paid obeisance to – an explanation which seems to be the most plausible of all.²

However, numerically the Namasudras constituted the second largest Hindu caste group in the British province of Bengal and the largest in its eastern parts. They lived mainly in the low-lying swamp areas of its six eastern districts, i.e., Bakarganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna (see the Table and Map showing distribution of population). In 1881, 71 per cent of the Namasudras of Bengal lived in these six

districts. In 1901 this proportion stood at 75.14 per cent of a total caste population of 1,860,914. But within eastern Bengal again, their major concentration could be found in the *bil* or marshy tracts of north-west Bakarganj, south Faridpur and the adjoining Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore and Sadar and Bagerhat subdivisions of Khulna. This region contained more than half of the entire Bengali Namasudra population – 51.64 per cent in 1881 and 54.12 per cent in 1901. It may therefore be identified, for the convenience of our study, as the principal Namasudra inhabitation zone. Further west their number diminished rapidly.³ And outside Bengal Proper, they were numerous only in the Purnea district of Bihar (see the Table) and in the southern districts of Assam.⁴

The late nineteenth-century colonial explanation for this geographical anchorage of these people was their tribal origin, as territoriality was believed to have been a salient feature of the tribes.⁵ However, what constituted a 'tribe' in the Indian context has been a subject of controversy among anthropologists. In general, until the 1940s, many believed that a tribe was a 'self-contained unit' and being a stage in an evolutionary process, the tribes gradually fused into the general Hindu society and were transformed into castes.⁶ The Namasudras ideally fitted into this explanatory scheme, which was initially developed in the colonial context of the late nineteenth century with a marked racist bias. The Chandalas of Bengal, as the Namasudras were referred to before their more respectable caste name came to be accepted, were portrayed in the early twentieth-century *jatimala* literature as the 'non-Aryan autochthonous people of the land'.⁷ The theory certainly appears to have been derived from the late nineteenth-century racial ethnology of the colonial officials like Herbert Risley, who divided the Indian population into two racial types, the Aryan and the Dravidian, and held that a tribe was a development out of race, while a caste was a development out of tribe. In Risley's typology the 'Namasudras (Chandals)' appeared as 'tribal',⁸ who had gradually embraced Hinduism, accepted the Hindu social organisation and thus had hardened into a caste.⁹ James Wise, shortly before him, had observed in a more racist tone that the Chandalas were a 'Dravidian tribe, who, driven before the Aryan invaders, or by later persecution, sought shelter in the marshy forests of Bengal'. That they were once 'a strongly organised commonwealth', he thinks, was further proved by the tradition of tribal state formation among these people – a 'Chandal Raja' once ruling in the forests of Bhawal.¹⁰ The tribe in this scheme appears as a tribal chieftdom. As the legends indicate, sometime in the late twelfth or

early thirteenth century, two Chandala brothers, Pratap and Prasanna Ray, ruled in the Bhawal pargana in the north of the Dacca district. It is quite probable, as surmised by two early twentieth-century local historians, that during the Pala period – the heyday of Buddhism in Bengal – these two local rulers had embraced that faith and had incurred the wrath of the local Brahmins. After the decline of the Palas, when there was again a resurgence of Brahmanism, these two local potentates were referred to, disparagingly, as Chandala Rajahs, and the ruins of their palace, which were still in existence in the early twentieth century, became known to the local people as *Chanral rajar bari* (the house of the Chanral, i.e., Chandala, kings).¹¹ The slighting tone of the epithet clearly indicates that the story of the 'Chandal Rajah' could well be a latter-day Brahmanical construction, rather than a reality.

But though the theory of east Bengal Chandalas representing a tribal chieftdom is of dubious validity, their gradual evolution as a caste, and also of their racial background, have been supported by other more recent authorities. A general study on the Chandalas observes that they were 'one of the several disadvantaged groups of early Indian society', whose condition was gradually deteriorating since the later Vedic age (c.1000 BC–600 BC). Initially they were looked at just as one of the many indigenous tribes 'living on the periphery of immigrant Aryan settlements'. But as the caste system began to stabilise and consolidate itself in the post-Vedic age, i.e., the age of *Dharmasutras*, such marginal groups as the Chandalas came to be regarded as untouchables, with severe restrictions imposed on all kinds of physical contact with them. They came to be regarded not only as a *varnasankara* or a mixed caste, but as the lowest among the offsprings of a *pratiloma* or hypogamous union of a Sudra male and a Brahman woman. Between 200 BC and AD 200, the *Manusmriti* further reiterated the polluted origin of the Chandalas to justify their relegation to the category of *niravasita* or excluded Sudras, who were obliged to live outside the village. The exact word *asprisya*, the Sanskrit equivalent of 'untouchable', seems to have appeared some time between the third and the sixth centuries of the Christian era, when the Chandalas had come to constitute the fifth or the *panchama* varna, a permanent underclass at the bottom of the Hindu social pyramid. Even the ascendancy of Buddhism and Jainism does not appear to have improved their position to any appreciable extent.¹²

This brings us to another related issue, i.e., the alleged conversion of the Chandalas to Islam during the medieval period. The colonial ethnographers popularised a social emancipation theory, which implied that in order to escape the rigours of the Brahmanical social order, the

Chandalas in large numbers were converted to Islam in eastern Bengal. The Muslim peasantry of this region, it is argued, were therefore of the same ethnic origin as the Chandalas. This stereotype, introduced by the colonial ethnographers like E. A. Gait or James Wise,¹³ was shared by many contemporary Bengalees. One of them, for example, argued that because of untouchability, nearly half of the lower caste population of Bengal converted to Islam during the period of its ascendancy in Bengal.¹⁴ Significantly, this conversion theory has been supported by some modern social scientists.¹⁵ But as Richard Eaton has pointed out, the spread of Islam in east Bengal need not be looked upon in terms of 'conversion'. Bengal being outside the core area of Brahmanical civilisation, the rigours of the caste system were much less oppressive here and therefore the social emancipation theory cannot help us understand the process. As the frontier of the cultivation of the land extended in eastern Bengal between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, Islam also spread as an ideology of civilisation, as 'a religion of the plough', bringing local people gradually into its fold. This Islamisation did not take place at one stroke, but as a gradual process, slowly absorbing the colonisers of the land, who were not yet touched or just slightly touched by Hinduism.¹⁶ The creation of a Muslim peasantry was therefore not the result of any large-scale 'conversion' of the Chandalas, but of gradual incorporation of people living at the periphery of Brahmanical civilisation. This theory of Islamisation also offers an important clue to the understanding of the status of the Chandalas themselves.

The word Chandalas, as surmised by another historian of ancient India, was used as a generic term, to refer to all the lower caste people.¹⁷ Since it is absolutely impossible to establish that they had descended from the particular mixed caste called Chandalas described in the post-Vedic *dharmasutra* literature, it is perhaps logical to conclude that they were just being referred to as such because of their low social position *vis-à-vis* the other Hindus. And their low social status was possibly the result of their late incorporation into Hindu society. These people, in all probability, were the local autochthons of the land who, along with the expansion of agriculture, were gradually being absorbed into the fold of Hindu society, as many of them were also being drawn into the arms of Islam. This is the process which D. D. Kosambi has described as that of 'tribal elements being fused into a general society'¹⁸ or N. K. Bose as the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'.¹⁹ This Hinduisation of the frontier people, as compared with the settled agricultural society in the west, took place at a rather late stage, when the caste system had already assumed

its fully developed shape and the outsiders were being admitted only at the bottom of the social structure.²⁰ This explains to a large extent the social degradation of the Chandalas, although this entrance into the Hindu fold placed them above some of 'the other non-Aryans like the Bagdi, Dom, Hadi, etc.', who, according to the author of *Bangiya Jatimala*, were denied this access till the early decades of the twentieth century.²¹

But as eastern Bengal, the natural habitat of the Chandalas, was in the outer circle of the Brahmanical civilisation, the rigours of the caste system remained much less oppressive here and untouchability in the strict sense of the term was never a problem, as it was in other parts of India. The Chandalas here, therefore, suffered less as a result, compared with their counterparts elsewhere. The *Brahmavaivarttapuranam* and the *Brihaddharmapuramam*, the two thirteenth-fourteenth-century texts, refer to the Chandalas of Bengal as an *antyaja*, or a low born mixed caste or *sankarajati*, but do not give any definite indication that they were held to be untouchables.²² Even Raghunandan, who is regarded as the most conservative *smritikara* of sixteenth-century Bengal, speaks of restrictions on connubial and commensal relations with the Chandalas, but does not appear to be insisting that their touch must be avoided by all means.²³ On the other hand, the literary evidence of the *Mangalakabya* of the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries clearly suggests, without any ambiguity, that the Chandalas lived within the precincts of the city and were not the dwellers of the periphery as enjoined by Manu.²⁴ In the early twentieth century, in a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission, the Bengal government in 1928 noted that 'the depressed classes in Bengal are not so heavily handicapped by caste prejudice as in some other provinces'²⁵ The observation was supported by an inquiry headed by the Director of Public Instruction, which revealed that the so-called untouchables of Bengal were in a comparatively better position than their counterparts in other regions of India.²⁶ The disability of the *antyaja* castes in Bengal, as an early twentieth-century social observer noted, was more in terms of unacceptability of water touched by them, rather than untouchability *per se*.²⁷ In January 1929, in his oral evidence before the Indian Statutory Commission, Mukunda Behari Mullick, the representative of the Namasudras, argued that the depressed classes in Bengal were considered to be 'untouchables, as water touched by these classes of people is not drunk by the so-called higher classes'.²⁸ So what was crucial even in his testimony was water touched by them, and not touch itself. In other words, the Namasudras of Bengal, even if they were the inheritors

of the social status of the ancient Chandalas, were not the untouchables or *Panchamas*.²⁹

Nor were the Namasudras the lowest of the low in Bengali Hindu society. In contrast to the situation in Assam where they used 'Namasudra' as a surname, thus instantly locating themselves in the caste hierarchy,³⁰ their counterparts in Bengal in the nineteenth-century used many of those surnames that adorned also the other respectable *satsudra jatis* (clean Sudra castes).³¹ And within Bengal again, their status varied widely, as according to some late nineteenth century accounts, in areas where they were numerically strong, particularly in the eastern districts, they were situated in popular esteem very much at the middle of the hierarchy of the *sankarajatis*, far above the few actual untouchable menial castes, such as Teor, Bagdi, Muchi, Dom, Hadi, Bhuimali etc. For example, the Deputy Magistrate of Faridpur placed them, along with the Sahas, Sutradhars and Dhobas, in Group 13 among twenty-five groups of castes listed in a circular distributed by Herbert Risley in July 1886. The District Engineer of the same district, who was also an Indian, placed them in Group 19 in a slightly expanded list of twenty-seven.³² Similarly, both in Dacca and Jessore, they were placed along with the Sahas, Sutradhars and Chasi Kaibarttas in Group 16 among twenty-three such groups, while in Dacca, not in Jessore, they were even allowed inside the courtyard of temples, though not in the sanctum sanctorum.³³ But by contrast, in Mymensingh, where they were less strong, they had been relegated to the tenth category among eleven.³⁴ And further west, in districts like Burdwan where numerically they were much weaker, their position was also nearly at the bottom.³⁵ The existing evidence therefore clearly shows that even within a particular linguistic region, such as Bengal Proper, there had been considerable variations in the social rank of a particular caste and, as this study will reveal further, these variations had a definite correlation with the differentiated material status of such people. It is only the standardising tendency of the colonial ethnographers which has given currency to the prevailing notion of a fixed universal rank for a particular caste, as Risley in this case clearly appears to have ignored the subtle variations, suggested by his own data, in the rank of the Chandalas. What is interesting, however, is the fact that gradually it was with reference to this standardised official constructions of rank that the Namasudras as well as their social neighbours began to define their actual social location – a situation which Bernard Cohn has described as the 'objectification' of colonial culture.³⁶

For example, though in terms of actual social status, we cannot really talk about *the* Namasudras, the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* of Bengal in

the late nineteenth century began to lump them together in determining their terms of relationship with such people. In other words, though the actual social status of the Namasudras varied from place to place, they were now being subjected to certain general social disabilities which created a considerable distance between them and the privileged higher castes. To give a few examples, all the religious and social ceremonies of the Namasudras were officiated by their own Brahmans who were disparagingly called *Barna Brahman* or *Chandaler Brahman*. The other members of the priestly caste would not receive these Brahmans as their equals and as a result, by the middle of the twentieth century the latter seemed to have slipped down to the same social status as that of their clients.³⁷ The village barbers, unlike the Brahmans, sometimes offered their services to the Namasudras, but more often in the late nineteenth century the latter had to shave themselves.³⁸ In social feasts, as early twentieth-century evidence suggests, they were always required to sit separately, sometimes even clean their own dishes.³⁹ And habitational segregation had not quite fallen into disuse in rural east Bengal even in the early twentieth century. As existing evidence on village settlement patterns indicates, each caste almost inevitably would live in a separate neighbourhood.⁴⁰ Many of these social disabilities might have been remnants from the earlier days, and were not just developments of the colonial period. In this sense one may also argue that it was this high caste stereotyping of the caste society that colonial ethnography actually reflected and legitimised, and later on objectified. It is true as well that the changes of the colonial period further reinforced such social customs and universalised them. Such changes were most clearly discernible in social attitudes towards the issue of untouchability.

The higher castes of Bengal did not always practise untouchability in its strictest form, but they often verbally invoked the notion in order to affirm their social authority. This ambivalent attitude of the *bhadralok* can easily be deduced from a number of incidents reported in the early twentieth century, and these may be presented here as anecdotal evidence. The first story has been narrated by a Namasudra himself from his early childhood experience. As a little boy he used to accompany his mother to the house of a well-to-do Kayastha landlord in Burdwan. The mother worked there as a maid servant and the elder sister looked after the children, which clearly indicates that they were not treated as untouchables. But one day the little boy urinated where he saw the eldest son of the landlord doing the same. This infuriated the landlady, who gave him a sound beating and then bathed ceremonially for touching an untouchable.⁴¹ Our second story is from Faridpur where a Brahman sub-

registrar had a number of Namasudra tenants, who from time immemorial were in charge of immersion of the image after Durga puja in their landlord's household. This certainly does not mean that they were being treated strictly as untouchables. But it was the mother of the sub-registrar who created a problem by not allowing the Namasudras to touch her feet after the immersion festival. So one year, the Namasudras refused to perform their duties unless the mother of their landlord allowed them this privilege and the other members of the family served them food after the festival. As it was extremely difficult to find other boats to carry on the festival at such a short notice, the family acquiesced. All their demands were met and the heavens did not fall.⁴² Our third story is from Bakarganj, where a poor Namasudra peasant was reported to have once visited the house of the well-known *swadeshi* leader, Aswini Kumar Datta, to test whether he treated them as untouchables or not. Datta embraced him without hesitation, let him sit beside him on the same couch and thus helped eliminate his doubts.⁴³

In the stories narrated above, and there are other similar anecdotes,⁴⁴ we may read a number of things. First of all, the concept of untouchability was not unknown in Bengal, though it was not always rigidly practised. It was more a political metaphor related to power structure, than a purely ritualistic concept. It created an environment of distrust and rancour which came to surface from time to time and vitiated social relations. Often it became a symbolic issue for asserting collective social positions. The lower castes complained, not without legitimate reasons, against the persistence of the custom. The higher castes often referred to it in order to assert their self-conceived social superiority. Even highly educated and accomplished members of the lower castes, such as Namasudra, could not always escape the humiliating experience of being treated, though in more subtle and ingenuous ways, as untouchables.⁴⁵ And the proliferation of the *jatimala* literature during this period only tended to legitimise and universalise such arrogant social attitudes of the higher castes. The Namasudras were zealously referred to as 'Chandalas', or more disparagingly as *Chanrals*, and were described with various derogatory epithets as *durbritta* (evil persons), *naradham* (worst of all people), *ati adham jati* (the most lowly caste), *antyaja* (low born) and *asprisya* (untouchable), with whom all sorts of contact had to be avoided and who should live outside the village or at least beyond the *bhadralok* neighbourhoods. The reason for all this humiliation was their mythical illegitimate origin from the illicit union of a Sudra man and a Brahman woman.⁴⁶ In other words, what this new literature was trying to initiate was a discourse that would give fresh

currency to the dicta of *Manusmriti* and the *samhitas*, because the lower caste assertiveness, as we shall see later, was threatening to disrupt the existing power relations which this ancient literature had once sanctified. The uppity *Chanral* had to be put in his proper place! It was this prevailing social attitude which was reflected in the memorandum that the Government of India submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1928 depicting the Namasudras as one of the 'untouchable' castes of Bengal.⁴⁷

Though stereotyped by the higher castes, and also by colonial ethnographers, as a uniformly despised lot, a single caste identity for the Namasudras was certainly not a given thing, as they were both differentiated in terms of status and divided in matters of internal organisation. There were about twelve endogamous sub-castes among the Namasudras of eastern Bengal, six in central and eleven in western Bengal.⁴⁸ Most of these subcastes were formed on the basis of real or supposed specialisation in occupation. Each had its place in a graded scale of ranking which had regional variations, with the Halwahs or the cultivators in general claiming precedence over all others.⁴⁹ Each subcaste had its own *panchayat* or administration, which governed the rules of endogamy as well as the norms of social and ritual behaviour of its members. Though hypergamy was always preferred by those situated at the lower end of the status ranking scale, intermarriage was usually prohibited among the members of the sub-castes. Even commensality between them was restricted, though in some areas taboos on smoking or drinking together were less rigidly followed. In other words, as E. A. Gait, the Superintendent of Census operations in Bengal in 1901 had suspected, and a number of district officials, both European and Indian, had agreed to, the 'sub-caste', in this case, was 'the true caste and the caste in the ordinary sense of the word . . . [was] merely a generic term . . . [which] link[ed] together a large and heterogenous group of sub-castes, the members of which . . . [could] not intermarry and . . . [did] not ordinarily eat together'. Individual mobility from a lower subcaste to a higher one, as both the Collector of Dacca and the Magistrate of Jessore had observed in their regions, was possible through a change of occupation; but it took a long time and involved some expenditure. Above all, it was not a universal practice – not permissible in Faridpur, for example, as the Deputy Magistrate of that district noted in his report to the census superintendent.⁵⁰

It is quite probable therefore that before nineteenth century there was no caste in Bengal called the 'Chandala'; it was only a generic term used to refer to a wide variety of lower caste people. Later on, the colonial

administration and its ethnographers lumped together several such low-ranking occupational sub-castes and branded them as Chandala. A generic term was thus transformed into a caste name, which its recipients later tried to break out of by adopting a more respectable appellation, Namasudra. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when the Namasudra social movement actually began, a lot of their energies were directed towards the elimination of sectional differences and construction of horizontal solidarity among the members of these various subcastes. Their leaders, in their very first conference in Khulna in 1881, stressed the need for unity and caste consciousness as first steps towards social improvement.⁵¹ But the fact that forty years later another Namasudra leader had to repeat the same appeal in his book,⁵² indicates the survival of sectional differences within the caste, inspite of the best efforts of their leaders. The Namasudras in the early twentieth century could therefore be best described, by using Irawati Karve's terminology, as a 'caste-cluster',⁵³ trying to construct an overarching 'caste' identity that would subsume the differences among a wide range of occupational endogamous 'subcastes'. For the time being it seemed achievable, as the new identity was defined in a confrontational context that underscored the commonality among all these groups, i.e., their existential experience of disabilities and low social status, which had impressed upon their mind a general desire to defy or negate the social authority of the high caste *bhadralok* who were responsible for their present condition.

II

At the initial stage, this solidarity among the Namasudras was also made possible by the fact that in almost all parts of Bengal their low social position coincided with their subordinate economic status *vis-à-vis* the higher castes. But in this respect too there developed considerable differentiation and ultimately, at a later stage, this proved to be more disruptive, much more than the social divisions, of their solidarity. During the nineteenth century, these people had undergone a profound physical transformation which had completely changed their own self-perception. In the *bil* or marshy tracts of eastern Bengal, which remained under water for more than six months in a year, the Namasudras used to maintain an amphibious existence, earning their livelihood primarily through boating and fishing.⁵⁴ But the rapid reclamation of these marshy wastes in course of the nineteenth century provided these hardy people with an opportunity to better their lot as pioneer cultivators. A mid-

nineteenth century account describes them as 'fishsellers, ploughmen, coolies and slaves';⁵⁵ but by the beginning of the twentieth century the majority of them lived on agriculture. As the census statistics of 1911 show, as much as 77.94 per cent of the Namasudras who had some occupation were associated with agriculture and in this sense it will not be wrong to call it an agricultural caste. But more appropriately, perhaps, it should be called a peasant caste. For among this Namasudra agricultural population, only 1.15 per cent were in the rent receiving category, 3.56 per cent were field labourers, wood cutters, etc., and therefore about 95.71 per cent approximately, were tenant-farmers, enjoying the status of either occupancy or non-occupancy *raiya*.⁵⁶ In eastern Bengal, where the peasantry in general was less differentiated and mostly small farmers, the 'bulk' of the Namasudra cultivators enjoyed, as Sugata Bose has shown, the 'chasi or peasant status', holding *jotes* or cultivable lands, owning the implements of cultivation and having solid titles to their homesteads.⁵⁷ But the number of landless labourers among them, who worked as sharecroppers or *bargadars*, began to increase in the late 1920s and 1930s, as the peasants' indebtedness caused by the depression pushed up the rates of mortgage, sale and transfer of occupancy holdings. True, these rates were not very high in districts like Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore or Khulna where the Namasudras mainly lived. But the phenomenon of dispossession was present there nevertheless,⁵⁸ gradually inflating the number of landless peasants and sharecroppers among these people. But apart from agriculture, the Namasudras could also be found in all sorts of other professions; many of them were employed as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, oilmen, fishermen, clubmen, etc.⁵⁹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, some of them (about 7.20 per cent of the actual earners) also entered the ranks of the burgeoning industrial working class of Bengal; some were traders and a few were in the higher professions. But the great majority of them still remained agriculturists.⁶⁰

Thus the rapid reclamation of the swamps and forests of eastern Bengal had transformed the Namasudras into a settled agricultural community. But since capital input for reclamation came from the *bhadralok* gentry, landowning was largely monopolised by them, mainly by the higher caste Hindus, i.e., Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya, and the high class Sayyid Muslims. The majority of the *zamindars*, independent *talukdars* and intermediary tenure holders came from their ranks.⁶¹ In 1911, for example, in the three eastern Bengal divisions, Dacca, Rajshahi and Chittagong, where the majority of the Namasudras lived, 80.82 per cent of the 'rent receivers' belonged to the higher social groups

mentioned above, while Namasudra representation in this category was just 2.14 per cent. If we look at the Hindu segment alone, approximately 56.58 per cent of the 'rent receivers' in these three divisions were Hindus; of them 66.58 per cent were Brahman, Kayastha or Baidya by caste, and only 3.78 per cent were Namasudras.⁶² The tenantry, on the other hand, belonged mostly to either Muslim or Namasudra community. In Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district, for example, where the Namasudras were most numerous, they held 38.65 per cent of the holdings; the Muslims held 43.82 per cent, while others only 17.53 per cent in 1925.⁶³ Thus the fundamental class dichotomy in the agrarian relations of eastern Bengal, i.e., between the rent-receivers and the rent-payers, had by and large coincided, in the case of the Namasudras, with the caste hierarchy. It is no wonder, therefore, that gradually landlordism itself came to be culturally associated, in Namasudra peasant consciousness, with high caste social identity, in opposition to which their own identity was being constructed and articulated in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.⁶⁴

Yet the Namasudra peasants were not living in abject poverty, eking out a precarious survival at near starvation level. The objective physical condition of the region where they lived often diluted the intensity of oppression by the dominant classes. They served as tenants mainly in the marshy or the forest reclamation areas of eastern Bengal, particularly in districts like Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, where the condition of the peasants was in general reported to be comparatively better. So far as reclamation is concerned, which continually eased out pressure on land, Gastrell's report of 1868 on the geographical conditions of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Jessore indicates that the process had been progressing steadily since the days of Rennell's survey of these areas. Rennell's map shows that in the years between 1764 and 1772 very little land had been brought under cultivation, either over the marshy tracts or to the south between them and the Sunderbans, where the major concentration of the Namasudras could actually be found. But since then the marshes appeared to have been rapidly silted up and were 'fast converted into first rate rice lands'. And by 1868, a little less than 50 per cent of the entire land area of the Sunderbans had been assigned under clearance leases to grantees, who had already cleared and brought under cultivation more than 30 per cent of it.⁶⁵

If we look at the particular situations in the districts where the Namasudras were most numerous, in Bakarganj for example, we will find that here the forest was fast retreating before the axe of the colonists and the level of the marshes or *bils* was continually rising from annual deposit

of silt and their size was therefore shrinking, as the edges were being brought under cultivation. The construction of the road from Palardi to Ambula, in the heart of the *bils* in Gaurnadi *thana*, further opened up the marshes to the cultivators and the colonists who brought many fertile areas under plough. As a result, as the Settlement Officer J. C. Jack calculated, the extension of cultivation in this district had been phenomenal: in 1770, only 56 per cent of the land area was occupied, while in 1905, it rose to 92.5 per cent, the extension being most remarkable in the *thanas* where the Namasudras could be found as tenants.⁶⁶ Absence of comparable data prevents us from making a similar calculation about Faridpur. Nevertheless, according to the rough estimates of Jack, the Settlement Officer of Faridpur, while much less than half of the district was cultivated at the time of the Permanent Settlement, during the years of his survey (1904–14) about 80 per cent of its land area was under plough.⁶⁷ In Jessore, the proportion of cultivation was most high in Narail (78.29 per cent) and Magura (78.64 per cent) subdivisions, where vast swamps had been reclaimed and brought under cultivation,⁶⁸ and these areas, it is important to note, contained the major concentration of the Namasudra peasantry in the district. In Khulna as well, marshes in the north were being steadily converted into rice fields, while forests in the south were being rapidly pushed back.⁶⁹

In these reclamation areas, soil was proverbially known to be more than ordinarily fertile and productive and this further added to the well-being of the peasants.⁷⁰ As the existing accounts show, in Bakarganj the *bil* areas in *thanas* Gaurnadi, Jhalakati, Swarupkati, Bhandaria etc., gave excellent paddy crop when the water was not too deep. In Faridpur, the marshy country was suitable only for *aman* or winter crop, but produced very heavily. In Jessore, the reclaimed swamp areas of Narail and Magura subdivisions yielded abundant harvests of rice. And in Khulna, the northern low lands full of *bils* contained, because of the rich river silt, the best lands for many varieties of coarse paddy and jute.⁷¹

In addition to this, rent was often low in these reclaimed areas, particularly where the 'man to land' ratio was extremely favourable. In Faridpur and Bakarganj the lowest rate of rent could be found in some of the *bil* areas, where the colonists had to be lured to an uninhabitable country and fight continually with nature to bring about the extension of cultivation. Similarly, in the forest reclamation areas of Khulna, 'privileged rents' were paid by the original settlers and their descendants.⁷² And where the rent was high, such as in the swamp areas of Jessore, its burden was offset by the higher returns from the land.⁷³ Even agricultural wages were high in many of these areas,

because of the unhealthiness and low density of population. As the Collector of Jessore reported in 1888, those who were ready to engage for daily wages were much in demand and competed for, and a large *jotedar* would offer them strong inducements to settle on his lands and would let them make their own terms.⁷⁴ In Khulna, landless labourers were few and well off, for there was a constant exodus of labour towards the Sunderbans where there was a large demand for it.⁷⁵

The situation described above should not be taken to mean that all the Namasudra peasants were equally prosperous and were living in a land of milk and honey. There were at the same time many factors that depressed their economic condition. The average size of a holding was in general small in east Bengal,⁷⁶ about 1.39 acre in Faridpur and 2.51 in Bakarganj. The largest holdings, it is true, could be found in the *bil* areas; but even here their size did not exceed 4 acres. And in Jessore, for which no such detailed information is available, the gross cultivated area per head of agricultural population was 1.5 acre, while the net area was 1.2 acre only.⁷⁷ As a result, in many of these areas, particularly in Faridpur, the cultivators had to purchase at least a quarter of the rice they needed for subsistence. A general feature of this district was importation of rice, the price of which was continually rising in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁷⁸

Apart from the above, there were other factors which adversely affected the *raiyats*. The very process of reclamation led to sub-infeudation, an elaboration of the tenurial structure and the consequent pressure on the tenantry at the bottom.⁷⁹ As the process settled down, the balance of power tilted permanently in favour of the landlords. Fixity of rent was a rare phenomenon in the marshy tracts, where the frontier of the cultivated area had been continually shifting. And quite often, if not always, the peasants were required to pay *abwabs* or illegal cesses imposed by their landlords.⁸⁰ But what was most distressing to them was the growing trend, after 1870, of converting the low cash rent-paying tenures into *dhankarari* tenures, paying a high produce rent. The valuation of such produce rents was much higher than the previous cash rents and the Namasudra peasantry was forced to agree to this conversion not through any process of law, but by the threat of eviction. Areas under produce rent, it is true, were not very large – only 2 per cent in Jessore, 5 per cent in Bakarganj and about 8 per cent in Faridpur at the turn of the century. But it was a typical feature of the regions where the Namasudras served as tenants.⁸¹

Indebtedness was the natural corollary of this gradually increasing demand for rent. And since institutional loans even in the third decade of

the twentieth century accounted for only a minuscule proportion of the total borrowing needs of the agricultural sector in Bengal, it meant an increasing dependence on moneylenders, who often 'combined in themselves the roles of landlord, merchant and village headman'.⁸² In Faridpur, indebtedness was an important factor affecting the condition of the *raiya*ts. In Jessore, the problem might have been a little less acute, but was present nevertheless. In Bakarganj, although permanent indebtedness was not a general feature, the amount of short-term borrowing was considerable and the terms onerous.⁸³ All these trends were further strengthened during the depression decade of the 1930s – the consequences of the increasing rate of land alienation due to mortgage sales during this period we have already noted. The economic condition of the majority of the Namasudra peasants, therefore, remained depressed, though none of them really starved, except in extraordinary situations. The result was a general feeling of alienation from the landowning classes and also in the process from the upper ranks in the caste hierarchy. In areas beyond their main inhabitation zone, in western Bengal for example, the Namasudras were even worse off, living mainly as *raiya*ts, sharecroppers, day-labourers, mill hands or some times in extreme cases as bonded labourers. They had among them a few rent receivers, but their number in 1911 was just 2,612 in the whole of central and western Bengal, a broad area that also included Jessore and Khulna, which we have identified as parts of the main Namasudra inhabitation zone. An average Namasudra in western Bengal, writes one of them, could not even imagine that land could be owned by any one else other than a high caste Hindu *bhadralok*.⁸⁴

III

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century in Faridpur and Bakarganj, and to a lesser degree in the neighbouring districts as well, a minority of the Namasudras had become prosperous by taking advantage of the reclamation process which, as we have mentioned earlier, in some situations attenuated the control of the dominant gentry. Sometimes the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* could not personally supervise the outlying areas of their estates, leaving the Namasudra and the Muslim colonists in a better position to bargain for the security of tenures, establish their actual control over the land and thus appropriate a greater share of the agricultural surplus generated through extension of cultivation. In the process, some of them achieved fairly comfortable status. A Namasudra

wealthy peasant or a cultivating tenure holder in Bakarganj or Faridpur or a Namasudra *ganthidar* in Jessore was not a rare figure in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century.⁸⁵

With the coming of jute cultivation, these people who had already some surplus, made further profits from the high prices of the new crop. When Gastrell wrote his report in 1868, there was a widespread misconception that the cultivation of jute impoverished the soil and hence the *raiya*s selected only those lands that were annually renovated by the inundation deposits of the rainy season.⁸⁶ Subsequently, the government encouraged the cultivation of jute by establishing experimental farms in Dacca in 1872-73.⁸⁷ The cultivators also soon discovered that the crop did not impoverish soil to the extent they apprehended, and consequently it was grown in larger areas, mainly in the marshy tracts which were considered to be most suitable for this purpose. As the golden crop promised large profits, jute cultivation began in earnest in northern Bakarganj and southern Faridpur, in Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore and in the northern lowlands of Khulna. These areas, it should be pointed out, fell squarely within the main Namasudra inhabitation zone. It is true that the cultivators could not reap the full benefit of the new cash crop. They did not as a rule sell directly to the jute firms, but to the middlemen at less than the actual price. The marketing mechanism was dominated by a chain of middlemen, from *faria* to *bepari*, who appropriated the bulk of the profit from its sale. There were other factors, too, such as the market tolls, manipulation of the grading of the quality of the crop, the system of advance payment or *dadān*, and the peasants' lack of holding power, all of which militated against the primary producers, depriving them of their legitimate share of the profits. But as the price of jute was rising sharply in the last years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth centuries, until about 1913, it is quite possible that some profit, however little it might have been, had also trickled down to the primary producers as well, resulting in a relative betterment of their material conditions. This obviously meant further prosperity for the well-to-do Namasudra peasants; and this trend lasted until at least the end of the jute boom in eastern Bengal in the second decade of the twentieth century.⁸⁸

What is important to note here is the fact that many of the Namasudras themselves could be found to be operating as *farias* and *beparis* or were engaged in other forms of river-borne trade of east Bengal. Traditionally associated with salt manufacturing, quite a few of them were now engaged in salt trade, while money lending became an additional source of income for others.⁸⁹ Later on, young members of

such prosperous families became educated, though literacy rates remained rather low – 3.3 per cent in 1901 and 4.9 per cent in 1911.⁹⁰ Some of these young educated descendants of the Namasudra peasants eventually joined the higher professions and added further to the wealth of their families.

But available statistics suggest that those who were really prosperous formed only a tiny minority among the entire Namasudra population and were not rich enough to be compared favourably with either the high caste Hindu gentry or the Muslim wealthy classes. In the census of 1891, out of 153,628 Namasudras in the district of Faridpur who had some occupation, only 57 or 0.04 per cent were returned as 'Land Occupants, not cultivating' and 2,935 or 1.9 per cent as 'Land Occupants, cultivating'.⁹¹ Twenty years later, in 1911, only 0.89 per cent of the Namasudra earners in the whole of Bengal had any income from rent. But possibly not many of them had more than a hundred *bigha* of land under occupation.⁹² In the same year, about 3.83 per cent of the Namasudra earners were engaged in trade and 1.04 per cent could be found in the higher professions. But the all-encompassing latter category included all sorts of professionals, ranging from gazetted government officers, doctors, lawyers and teachers down to clerks, cashiers and managers of landed estates. Therefore, to be more specific about their representation in different grades of 'higher professions', it should be mentioned that they had among them in 1911 only 3 gazetted and 187 non-gazetted employees in the public administrative services, 30 commissioned and gazetted officers in the public force and 1,112 doctors, teachers and lawyers.⁹³ Many of the 'doctors' included in this category were, however, only traditional practitioners who kept alive a local healing tradition called the 'Chandshi treatment', based on some crude forms of surgery and medicines prepared from snake poison.⁹⁴ The Namasudra representation in the 'higher professions' therefore does not look to be very impressive, nor was it improving very significantly. Twenty years later, in 1931, this caste could boast of only 17 gazetted officers, 767 non-gazetted government employees and 4,263 lawyers, doctors and teachers.⁹⁵ But in the meantime, the population of the caste had also increased from 1,908,728 in 1911 to 2,094,957 in 1931. Improvement in absolute numbers, therefore, did not indicate any significant betterment in proportions.

It will not, therefore, be an exaggeration to say that this upwardly mobile section was of relatively moderate means and remained in a true sense a microscopic minority, being even less than 2 per cent of the entire caste population in 1911.⁹⁶ All the Namasudras, it thus appears, did not

enjoy identical economic status, but the differentiation was not very wide either. In course of the nineteenth century there had been a relative improvement in the material condition of the majority of this caste population, in the sense that they had emerged as a settled peasant community, not certainly living at the level of starvation. Yet only a few had any sizeable amount of surplus in their hands. To put it in a different way, the community was differentiated in social as well as economic terms, but not as yet divided so sharply as to forestall the development of a commonly shared sense of group identity. The peasantry had already been alienated from the hegemonic high caste gentry, who oppressed them in both social and economic spheres of life. The upwardly mobile section, on the other hand, was numerically so small and economically so weak, with such a low ritual rank, that it could not identify itself with the high caste *bhadralok*. Their newly acquired secular social status made them even more conscious of their paradoxical social position, especially of the anomaly involved in their performing roles higher than their traditional caste occupation. Thus by the late nineteenth century the Namasudras, through a commonly shared physical experience of constantly encountering a hostile nature in the vast marshy or forest tracts of east Bengal, emerged as a formidable peasant community, with an up and pushing group providing it with the necessary leadership. They came to constitute in rural east Bengal an organised middle peasantry, who could be identified as the ideal repository of revolutionary potential in any rural setting.⁹⁷

However, as their social location represented more or less a convergence of caste and class positions, to them community formation around caste identity appeared to be the most convenient and perhaps the only imaginable mode of mobilisation. Community solidarity, in this context, seemed to be the most natural alternative source of power that could enable them to challenge the dominant classes and thus to rework the existing relations of power. It was within this context that in the late nineteenth century their transition from Chandala to Namasudra identity took place, though it is difficult to specify the date when the new name actually began to take off. The first organised meeting of the Namasudras for their social upliftment was held in 1881 in village Dattadanga of Mollahat subdivision of Khulna district.⁹⁸ It was probably around this time that their new name began to gain currency. James Wise whose ethnological account of eastern Bengal was published in 1883, found this name in social use.⁹⁹ The circular which Risley had issued in 1886, for the guidance of the local informants supplying him data for his ethnological survey of Bengal, also referred to the community as

'Chandal or Namasudra'.¹⁰⁰ The same expression was later incorporated for the first time into the census report of 1891, indicating wider popular acceptance of the new name and its official legitimisation. By 1900 it seems to have gained further social recognition and, as local officials reported from eastern Bengal, the members of this community would now strongly 'object to being called Chandals'.¹⁰¹ They seem to have constructed by now a new collective self-image which was radically different from that of the indolent boating or fishing Chandalas, living at the threshold of poverty and dwelling on the fringes, if not totally outside, of human settlements. But the differences that existed among them could hardly be effaced altogether; so, as their movement made progress, it also became evident that it reflected different aspirations, varying levels of consciousness and divergent forms of action, yet all encapsulated into one. How exactly was this caste identity constructed and a movement organised around it, despite differentiation in social status and distinctions of economic position? This is the question that now needs to be explored, which we will do in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Beginnings of Social Protest and Construction of the Community, c1872–1905

I

During the nineteenth century, the members of the Namasudra caste had emerged as a settled peasant community by taking advantage of reclamations in the vast marshy and forest tracts of eastern Bengal. This process of physical transformation from an amphibious existence to the status of settled agriculturalists and social mobility had also differentiated them in terms of economic condition and social status, though they were not as yet very sharply divided in class terms. In many respects they all still shared a common experience of deprivation and degradation and were closely knit by affinal and kinship ties and geographical location. This shared experience created a congenial ground for the construction of a collective self based on an ideology of protest that would subsume the inchoate class distinctions within the group and set it against its Other.

The essence of this new collective self of the Namasudras was an ever-growing sense of self-respect and what had contributed to its development, apart from their constant encounter with an unfriendly physical environment, was their contact in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries with a number of libertarian social influences. One of the earliest of such influences was that of Islam, as its egalitarian social philosophy had lured many of them into its fold. Although it is difficult to quantify the rate of conversion in Bengal, according to speculations, both old and recent, nearly half of its lower caste population had embraced Islam during the two and half centuries of its existence in this region.¹ Later in the nineteenth century, it was replaced by Christianity as the major proselytising faith, as it was particularly in the Namasudra populated areas of Bengal that missionaries of various denominations were most active. What was important, however, was not conversion

itself, but the spirit of self-respect that these people derived from such influences. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century the Namasudra collective identity had become well entrenched and they were no longer interested in conversion. Thus, the Australian Baptist missionary, Dr C.S. Mead, who was most active among the Namasudras of Faridpur, noted in despair that they had only learnt to 'lift up their heads', but refused to 'bow their heads in living and lowly homage at His pierced feet'.²

What had further inspired the Namasudras to hold their heads high was the influence of the *Bhakti* movement, particularly its more non-formal and equalitarian rural variants. The movement had been started in Bengal by Sri Chaitanya and his disciples, whose avowed goal was the social and spiritual salvation of the downtrodden. But Vaishnavism could not ultimately escape the influence of the 'great Sanskrit theological and philosophical tradition'. In order to be accepted as authentic, the teachings of Sri Chaitanya had to be related to the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions. This task of 'tying' Bengal Vaishnavism 'into the orthodox traditions of Indian religion' was accomplished by the *sada* or six Goswamins of Vrindavana.³ But as the disciples of Sri Chaitanya were organised into a sect in Bengal, known as the *Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampraday*, it developed a syncretism that drew together the early liberal trends as well as the later *Smarta-Puranic* canonical orthodoxy. It also brought in the *Sahajiya* tradition which had a tremendous influence over the lower orders of the society. Thus *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* gradually turned into an institution through which the lower caste people developed a new sense of self-respect and also began to assert it in larger social spheres.⁴ But as Chaitanya himself had left the caste question open, 'at least in the social sense', his later followers, in the absence of any consistent model to follow, also took various positions. While Nityananda and his followers, many of whom had *Sahajiya* leanings, continued to assist the lower castes and the untouchables, the more orthodox section, the Shantipuri Brahman Advaita Acharya and his followers, refused to admit such elements into their sect.⁵ Gradually, this orthodox trend became dominant, as the Brahman *gurus*, scared by the threat to their authority posed by the ever-increasing number of lower caste converts, began to introduce caste rules and codes of differentiation. The Brahman devotees were allowed to enjoy all sorts of ritualistic privileges, while the untouchables were despised as *jat vaishnava*.⁶ The sect's previous image of protest and irreverence was submersed in established orthodoxy and uninhibited appropriation of symbols of order, discretion and domination. An early twentieth-century oral

tradition from the Bengal countryside bears ample testimony to this new aristocratic spirit of differentiation among the Vaishnavas:

'Neda nedi sabai bujhi? Emni matibhram'
*Vaishnavero uchunichu achhe bhedkram.'*⁷

[They are all just shaven-headed males and females, you think? That is an error. Distinctions between high and low exist among the Vaishnavas too.]

As organised Vaishnavism thus developed its image of a 'neo-Brahman order', promoting 'social cohesion', rather than 'social revolution',⁸ the more radical *Sahajiya* tradition which, true to its *Tantrik* heritage, had repudiated the caste system,⁹ began to grow in popularity. Together with this, there developed a number of 'deviant' sects, mostly under non-Brahman *gurus*, who disavowed all established norms of caste distinction and deference. These *Sudra gurus*, who had no formal link with the orthodox *Gaudiya Vaishnava* order, began to attract thousands of lower caste devotees who flocked to them in search of social emancipation.¹⁰ When in the late nineteenth century Herbert Risley found the majority of the *Namasudras* 'profess[ing] the tenets of the Vaishnava sect of the Hindus',¹¹ it was actually these various deviant sects which they belonged to. For example, around the middle of the nineteenth century, the *Kartabhaja*, a deistical sect which had repudiated idolatry and caste, had established remarkable influence over the *Namasudras* living in the swamp areas of Faridpur and north-west Bakarganj.¹² Another sect which also attracted such people in the Bikrampur region was the *Kishori Bhajan Sampraday* which, started by a man called Kalachand Vidyalkar, made no distinction between castes.¹³ The *Namasudras* of Dacca, around the same time, are also reported to have been attracted to another such charismatic *guru* called Keshab Pagal or Thakur Kesha Pagla, who also enjoined his disciples not to acknowledge any superiority of caste.¹⁴

Another major influence on the *Namasudras* was that of a sect which had developed around Sahlal Pir. Born in 1700 in rural east Bengal, Sahlal had gathered around him both Muslim and numerous Hindu disciples, the majority of whom were *Namasudras*, drawn from the villages of Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, etc. After his death in c.1805, the sect developed further under his three sons. What the Pir had preached was a simple gospel of personal devotion (*bhakti*) and spiritual emotionalism (*bhava*) and the disciples were admitted through a ritual of initiation. This insistence on initiation appears to be in itself an attempt to undermine the significance of birth, which was of utmost importance in organised Hinduism. The hierarchy of caste was further

challenged by the acceptance of the primacy of *guru* or *murshid* by the disciples. This was different from the *gurubad* of orthodox Hinduism, as in this case the *guru* was sought after not for getting any supreme syllable or *mantra* or for officiating in the rituals. The *guru* was to be the centre of devotion of the disciples and this devotion had to be unconditional. Everyone, the Hindu disciples included, had to visit the Pir's *darga*, accept his *sinni* and drink water touched by his feet. In this way, as a *Murshida* song indicated, the disciples would renounce their pride of caste and lineage ('*tor bazare aisyare amar gelo jati kulre*'), in order to appease the *guru* and attain divine joy. As the modern chronicler of the sect describes them, the *Murshida* songs, which are sung even today by the Namasudras of eastern Bengal, are those which sang of the glory of humanity.¹⁵ Their main dictum '*Murshid satya*' ('truth is the preceptor') was later adopted by another sect known as the *Darbesh Sai Sampraday*, which also became popular in the Namasudra populated areas of Dacca in the mid-nineteenth century under the initiative of a man called Udaychand Karmakar.¹⁶

All these heretical sects, which had profound influence on the Namasudras, sought to initiate what James C. Scott would call an alternative 'discourse of dignity', and tried to create an 'autonomous social space' where it could be asserted.¹⁷ This process also helped in the construction of the community as it involved a confrontation, though inarticulate or hidden, with its other. As all these sects sought to obliterate the distinction of caste, albeit only among their members, they constituted a direct threat to the established cosmology of power. And so the hostilities of the high caste Hindu elites towards these deviant sects were not even thinly concealed. These sects were stereotyped as plebeian, since no *bhadralok* was ever associated with them. These were considered to be exotic as their rituals and philosophical constructions were totally different from the tenets of *Gaudiya Vanishnavism*. And what was worse, these sects were stigmatised as assemblies of licentious low-caste people united to indulge in illicit sexual activities, with an ever-increasing number of bastards swelling their ranks.¹⁸ In this way, the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* distanced themselves from the members of the deviant sects; but as a result the latter developed a greater sense of cohesion and camaraderie. The lines of demarcation between 'we' and 'they' were thus more clearly inscribed on the minds of the despised and disprivileged.

But the protest of the Namasudras against social humiliation and degradation did not always remain concealed or hidden. As they gradually constructed a more dignified new collective self-identity, they

now sought to assert it. This required the breaking of the barriers of deference, which meant implicitly an attempt to subvert the hegemonic ritual order. Their first organised endeavour at self-affirmation started in Faridpur-Bakarganj region in late 1872, when in official documents they were still being referred to as Chandalas. The movement had no political significance at that time and was only 'an effort made by them to raise themselves in social scale among the Hindus'. The immediate occasion was the *sradh* or funeral ceremony of the father of a well-to-do Chandala headman of village Amgram in Bakarganj. Disregarding the established norms of commensality, he invited his higher caste neighbours to attend the ceremony and dine in his house. The latter, at the instigation of the Kayasthas, refused to accept the invitation and the reasons cited were many. The women of this caste visited the market-places without any sense of shame and their degraded status was even acknowledged by the government, as in the jails only the Chandala inmates were employed as scavengers for removing filth. A meeting of all the Chandala headmen was therefore organised immediately and the following resolutions were adopted: (1) women must not in future visit *hats* (periodic rural marts) and bazaars; (2) service of no kind whatever be taken with the other castes; and (3) food prepared by all other Hindu castes, other than Brahmans, was not to be partaken of. Their demand for equal treatment in jails was also duly communicated to the government officials visiting the locality.¹⁹ These demands need not be taken as evidence of emulative behaviour of the lower castes, often encoded in the word 'Sanskritisation',²⁰ but rather as a protest against a social condition that imposed on them a low status, lack of social honour and certain specific forms and conditions of labour.

The organisers were alive to the problems of the poorer Chandalas who were likely to suffer as a result of the no-work programme. Hence as a safeguard, it was decided that their relatives should support them, and in case of there being no relative, the village community would take the responsibility. But if in spite of that anybody refused to join the movement, he or she was to be threatened with social ostracism. To ensure further participation, it was publicly announced, by beat of drum at important *hats* (village marts), that it was the government which had issued orders for the observance of the above resolutions.²¹ The Chandala leaders, as it appears, thus tried to invoke the notions of community solidarity as an alternative source of power. But at the same time there were also appeals in the name of a distant but higher authority of the state, as a strategy to subvert the immediate local constellation of power. Their attempt to construct the community was thus grounded

very much within the broader context of power relations in colonial society.

As a result, however, the movement spread rapidly over a wide region comprising the swamp country south of Faridpur and north-west Bakarganj, as well as the adjoining areas of Jessore. The epicentre gradually shifted to the district of Faridpur and was located chiefly in Muksudpur and Gopalganj *thanas*.²² So complete was the strike that about four months after its commencement, the Magistrate of Faridpur, in the course of his tour of the affected areas, found 'the fields . . . untilled, the houses unthatched, and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mahamedan, or a Chandal woman in any market'. The situation was so volatile in Muksudpur and Gopalganj that extra police had to be mobilised from the divisional headquarters for maintaining peace and order.²³ But during this time the movement was also showing signs of weakness, as the poorer Chandalas found it difficult to sustain it any longer.²⁴ As they returned one by one to their old jobs, they had to submit to worse terms than they had before the strike took place.²⁵ Their main social grievances also remained unredressed, as the higher castes still refused to accept food and water from their hands. And the government preferred not to interfere with an age old practice of employing Chandala inmates in conservancy duties in jails, although henceforth they were only to be persuaded and not forced to do so.²⁶ Their first open attempt to rework the relations of power in local society thus ended in a failure.

II

The initial set back impressed upon the Namasudra leaders the necessity of a more effective social organisation that would both bind the community together and give them self-confidence to assert themselves as a collective against the hegemonic elites of the local Hindu society. This emotional need of the community explains the growing popularity of the *Matua* sect, which had emerged and spread among the Namasudras of Faridpur also in the 1870s.²⁷ The sect was started by a man called Harichand Thakur, who was born in a Chandala or Namasudra family in 1811 (or 1812) in a village called Safaladanga in Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district.²⁸ He and his family had been Vaishnavites for generations. His grandfather Mochanram was a devout Vaishnava and was known in his locality as Thakur Mochairam. Mochanram's eldest son Jasomanta was a Vaishnava devotee as well, and

he too inherited the title of 'Thakur' and it was from his time that the family abandoned its original surname Biswas. He was a man of moderate means, with two or three milch cows, and the milk products which he personally sold in the market added to his income. His son Harichand was evicted from his ancestral village through the machinations of the zamindar and had to settle ultimately in village Orakandi (in the same subdivision), where he took to cultivation and small trade for a living. But already known as a religious person endowed with magical healing power, he soon began to attract disciples from his own village, as well as from the neighbouring villages like Ghritakandi, Machkandi, Kumaria, Chandradwip and Arokandi. And as he started gathering a following, one day he experienced *atma-darshan* or self-revelation, through which he realised that he was the incarnation of God himself, born on earth to bring salvation to the downtrodden. Immediately after this he started organising his own sect on the basis of a simple non-ritualistic doctrine of *bhakti*: 'all rituals, except devotion to God, faith in mankind and love for living creatures, are distortions'.²⁹

As his simple doctrine had an obvious appeal for the lower orders of society, more and more of them flocked around Harichand. The devotees made him a saint and imposed on him the attributes of charisma. This charismatisation, as Bryan Wilson has argued, involves a 'social endowment of power',³⁰ as the prophet embodies his disciples' wish to see dramatic changes in a given situation that they have already deemed to be thoroughly unacceptable. Everywhere, as in Europe of the Middle Ages, 'sainthood and the miraculous were [therefore] closely linked'. For the people, who 'felt both physically and spiritually powerless', followed the saints who were believed to have inherited God's power, i.e., the power of the highest sort. Not that miracles actually had to happen; it was the devotees' imagination, expressed through hearsay and rumours, that made the saint's reputation and legitimised his position as a source of alternative power that was beneficial to the people.³¹

This, of course, had obvious implications for the existing relations of power in a local society. In this case, the Namasudras began to believe that Harichand was gifted with supernatural power, not only to cure a disease, to give life to the dead or to tame a tiger, but to punish the social offenders as well: he could destroy the *zamindari* of an oppressive Brahman landlord or curse a cruel *naib* (a landlord's agent) with leprosy.³² The development of the sect thus tended to subvert the hegemonic order and therefore its upholders also tried to deter them, at first by means of physical coercion (with the help of the local zamindar) and then by resorting to social boycott. Yet another tactic of the

opponents was to ridicule them as *moto* or people drunk with their own spiritual outpourings (*matoyara*). But as in this way the upper caste Hindus, and also the respectable Vaishnavas, distanced themselves from the followers of the sect, the latter developed a greater sense of solidarity. In order to vindicate the irreverent image of his sect, Harichand turned the ridiculous epithet ('*moto*') into a symbol of protest; he called his sect '*Matua*', a word that could not be found in the elites' lexicon.³³ The sect gradually grew in size as it became the rallying point for all the untouchable and lower caste people in the region – the Namasudras, of course, constituting an overwhelming majority of them.³⁴ Harichand died in 1878, but the sect expanded further under his son Guruchand Thakur, born in 1846.³⁵ The latter formalised the doctrines of the sect to suit better the needs of an emerging lower caste peasant community.

Though claims were put forth that it was a 'new' religion,³⁶ the philosophical notions of the Matua sect, its general view of life and society and its concepts of cosmology were all constructed through a selective absorption and/or inversion of ideas and symbols taken from traditional Hinduism and the *Bhakti* tradition, incorporating both the canonical and *Sahajiya* variants of *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*. But the sect would not have been so popular had it not posed a challenge to the hegemonic ritual order and sought to negate its ideology of hierarchy. Harichand was portrayed as the person who had destroyed the pride of the Kshatriya and brought the Brahman and the Chandala together on a platform of equality. His son Guruchand also visualised a society where there would be no differentiation among human beings – particularly among the members of the Matua sect there was to be no division of caste.³⁷ Food and water could be had from the hands of any individual who had a 'pure character', as no other social distinction was recognised. Since the human body was the abode of the Supreme God, there could be no reason why it was to be regarded as impure or untouchable.³⁸ This humanitarian faith impelled the disciples of Harichand to abolish all distinctions among themselves.³⁹ Even gender distinctions were done away with, as women were accepted as social equals and were given equal rights in the congregational life of the sect.⁴⁰ And though initially focused on a single community (i.e., the Namasudras), it gradually attracted members from other sections of the society including, as it appears from one of its devotional songs, some of the upper castes as well.⁴¹

Guruchand believed that though born in a Namasudra family, he would not be able to salvage his own community unless he worked for the salvation of all other social groups, the depressed and the untouchables in particular. This gradually developed into a universalist

approach, which indicates his awareness of the outer world and of the new humanism popularised by the Bengal Renaissance. Guruchand, as his biographer tells us, had once told the wife of an Australian Baptist missionary that all human beings living in this world would be considered by him as belonging to one race.⁴² Nothing could be better expressive of the universal egalitarianism of the Matuas, and it was this humanistic approach of the sect that made it so popular among the lower orders of the society. Yet, in reality, this universalism does not appear to have been pushed very far and the sect, despite big claims, remained more or less coterminous with the Namasudra community. But this, on the other hand, gave the sect more homogeneity which the other religious orders of the same genre lacked.

Another reason why the depressed Namasudra community felt attracted to this sect was its open challenge to the hegemony of the Brahmans, who were the pivot of the local power structure. One of the methods of perpetuating this hegemony was *gurubad*. The *guru*, by acting as the intermediary between the God and his disciples, enjoyed total control over the latter's spiritual life. The position of the *guru* was the prerogative of the Brahman, as they enjoyed a monopoly over scriptural knowledge and an exclusive right to perform Vedic rites. The Brahman *guru* therefore came to be looked upon as the only person who could initiate (known as *diksha*) others into the path of spiritual salvation – and salvation was unattainable without his gracious help.⁴³ The concept, in other words, required a total subjection of the disciples to their *guru* and this concept was later incorporated into the orthodox Vaishnava theology. As Sanatan Goswami says in *Haribhaktibilasha*: 'pay obeisance to your guru and surrender everything at his feet and after being initiated by him in a proper way, learn from him the sacred Vaishnava mantra'.⁴⁴ It was the same text which stressed that the Brahman *gurus* should enjoy the most exalted position within the Vaishnava order. Therefore, when the Sudra *gurus* began to initiate their disciples, it was considered to be deviation and they came to form what are usually known as 'deviant' orders. The supremacy of the *guru* was further emphasised in the other *Bhakti* texts, which gradually made a distinction between a *Sravanaguru* or *Sikshaguru* or preceptors who preached or taught *bhakti*, and the *Dikshaguru* who initiated the disciples into the path of devotion by giving them the sacred *mantra* or 'syllable'. As time passed, the *Dikshaguru* assumed the status of God and the 'intermediacy of the *Guru* became an essential concept of *bhakti*.'⁴⁵

Both Harichand and his son Guruchand of the Matua sect repudiated this essentialism of intermediacy. Harichand insisted that there was no

need for initiation (*diksha*), nor even for pilgrimage and the only means to achieve salvation was through simple devotion and love for God, for which no mediation of any 'businessman-like guru' was necessary.⁴⁶ Guruchand also thought that although the guru chanted the sacred *mantra* into the ear of the disciple, all other *mantras*, except the name of God or *Harinam* were meaningless, and to learn this supreme syllable or *mahamantra* no initiation or dispensation was necessary.⁴⁷ But it is also true that though the role of the Brahman *dikshaguru* was denounced, both Harichand and Guruchand themselves gradually assumed, among the devotees of the Matua sect, the status of *sravanaguru* or *sikshaguru*. This development, that amounted almost to their deification, becomes evident from a number of latter-day devotional songs of the sect.⁴⁸

The Matua sect did not, however, recognise idolatry and ritualistic Hindu religion and condemned them as instruments of Brahman domination. The deities of the Hindu pantheon, Guruchand believed, were the creation of the scriptures written by the Brahmans and the sole purpose of these scriptures was to establish the supremacy of the Brahmans in society. The devotees of the Matua order, therefore, did not have to worship any God or Goddess. Their only deity was He who resided in the heart of every human being and their *mantra* could only be expressed in the language of love and devotion. To save the masses from the evils of priest-craft, Guruchand denounced all rituals as puzzling mumbo-jumbo which the Brahmans had devised to deny the people an understanding of the real meaning of religion. He, therefore, wanted, as we learn from his biographer, a simple religion that would provide guidance to the common people for living a meaningful life.⁴⁹ If there was at all any prescribed ritual for the followers of Matua, it was to pay regular obeisance at the altar of Lord Hari and to sing collectively the songs of devotion or *Kirtan* to attain a mystical joy that would lead them to their salvation.⁵⁰ However, as the sect developed, the Lord Hari and Hari, the first preceptor, became identified in the songs composed by the later devotees, and subsequently Guruchand too was elevated to this status of a deity.⁵¹ This was not perhaps unexpected, as popular devotion often requires some concrete manifestation of divinity as its object.

Kirtan was, however, an essential feature of the Matua religious life and was of tremendous social significance. It conveyed a message of solidarity to the members of the community and thus united them in a common pursuit of self-respect and confidence. To use Victor Turner's phrase, it gave them a sense of forming the 'communitas', of being 'a homogeneous, unstructured and free community'.⁵² And at the same time it also sought to communicate a message across the social

boundaries to the 'others' and thus reformulated the cleavages between 'us' and 'them'.⁵³ As *kirtan* was sung collectively, it gave the sect a congregational character and helped its predominantly Namasudra devotees to construct and continually reinforce their collective identity through shared experience of devotion. This congregational singing of devotional songs had a long tradition in Bengal, as an authority on this socio-religious phenomenon tells us.⁵⁴ It existed even before Sri Chaitanya popularised it in the sixteenth century, though in the post-Chaitanya period it became much more open and widely practised. As people high and low gathered in assemblies, sang and danced together, all social distinctions were forgotten. *Kirtan*, in other words, had a great levelling impact and was not therefore liked by the orthodox custodians of social hierarchy. It also fostered among the participants a sense of co-operation and camaraderie, and thus gave them a sense of self-confidence. At times of calamity, people in the Bengal countryside frequently resorted to this practice of singing *kirtan*, as it gave them the courage to face difficult times and to do so collectively.

For the Namasudra devotees of the Matua sect, *kirtan* was also a source of collective strength. The songs (or *namgan*, as they were popularly called) emphasised, first of all, the super power of the *gurus*, both Harichand and Guruchand, who could help their disciples to overcome all the crises of their lives. The *gurus* could take away the fear of the king and ward off all hazards ('*Rajbhay nasila bighna binashila*');⁵⁵ they could bring solace to all sorrows ('*duhkha nibaran*') and give life to the dead ('*Mara dehe pran dile bhagaban*');⁵⁶ by propitiating Guruchand the hungry could get food and the childless could get son ('*Annaheene pabi anna, putraheene putra pabi*');⁵⁷ by the grace of Harichand, the lame could dance, the blind could see and the dumb could sing the songs of Hari ('*Namer gune khanje nache duti bahu tule/ Bobay bale balo Haribol andhe chay nayan mele*');⁵⁸ the sheer magic of *Harinam* cured all diseases ('*Hariname sarbbabyadhi hare*').⁵⁹ It is difficult to ascertain the period when all these different songs were actually composed. But these themes appear so frequently in the collection of Matua songs, that we may reasonably assume that there was a continuity in the earlier and later songs of the sect and some of these songs were even sung during the lifetime of the *gurus* themselves.

What all these songs aimed at was the generation of self-confidence in the minds of those who were otherwise powerless and ill-equipped to face the hazards and obstacles of life. It was *namgan* which also gave them courage and self-respect and the strength to stand up to the powerful adversaries who kept them down in society. This congrega-

tional singing of *namgan* was, for the Namasudra devotees of the Matua sect, a political ritual to assert their collective will. It would construct a new self and that would controvert the established cosmology of power in local society. The *namgan*, in other words, were songs of self-assertion for bolstering up the collective ego of a community:

*Bhara buke khola chule, jay Harichand bole,
Danda dekhi Matua santan,
Dam dam maro danka, chhinde phelo sab sankha
Maha byome uda re nishan.
Bhabna ar karishki, benche theke maris ki?
Bado hoye holi hataman,
Jago, jago, jago bir, soja kore rakho sir,
Jak jan benche thak man.*⁶⁰

[The devotees of Matua, with bare chests and unbridled hair, stand and say victory to Harichand. Beat your drums, get rid of all your fears and hoist your flag up in the sky. What are you thinking of, do you want to behave like dead people while you are still alive? Though you are great, you have been denied honour. So awake O brave men. Hold your heads high, do not give up self-respect, even though you have to sacrifice your life.]

III

The rituals and practices of the Matua sect had thus developed to suit the needs of a lowly, self-assertive peasant community and for this reason its ideology was also deliberately given an 'oppositional form'.⁶¹ At an age when *Vedanta*⁶² was being used by the Bengal literati as a 'key to the unity underlying Indian culture, and as a triumphant answer to the challenge of foreign values',⁶³ the Matua philosophy was meant to oppose the Sankarite *advaita* Vedantism, which was regarded as the quintessence of the classical religion of the elites, devised to keep the toiling Sudras in a perpetual state of subordination. *Vedanta* represented the monistic philosophy of spiritual salvation. While the world was regarded as *maya* or a reflection of relative reality, salvation meant renunciation, getting out of the illusory worldly bondages and attaining the supreme truth, i.e., *Brahma*, who eluded embodiment. The privileging of *Vedanta* in elite Bengali religious discourses had been the result of the endeavours of Rammohan Roy and his Brahmo Samaj and later in a different way of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement.⁶⁴ The *Bhakti* tradition, on the other hand, was against this philosophy of

monism; it opposed the concept of an illusory world and the desirability of spiritual salvation in the other world. In this tradition, the world was true and represented variegated manifestations of the supreme being, who claimed the loving devotion of all the mortal beings.⁶⁵ Harichand developed this difference in perspectives into a position of opposition.

Harichand believed that *Vedanta* inculcated a theory of despair; by advocating renunciation of worldly desires it deliberately demotivated the working people, and mentally conditioned them to accept their subordinate position in society, while contemplating salvation in the other world.⁶⁶ He therefore preached the hollowness of the quest for spiritual salvation and advised his disciples to worship the goddess of wealth.⁶⁷ Guruchand formulated this opposition to the doctrine of renunciation in sharper terms. Those whose major concern was how to procure food for sheer survival could not, he thought, afford to waste time in pursuit of spiritual abstractions or be lost in mystical devotion.⁶⁸ For the hungry, food was God and their duty was to seek the favour of this supreme God or *Annabrahma*.⁶⁹ 'Earn money, be educated and become respectable', was his principal advice to the disciples. They must propitiate the Goddess of wealth, for wealth was the source of all power and those who were favoured by Lakshmi, received the favour of Narayana (or Hari) as well.⁷⁰ Guruchand's preachings therefore stood in sharp contrast to the Weberian formulation of the Hindu tradition as tending to destroy the 'drive towards the rational accumulation of property'.⁷¹ We may also argue that contrary to what Weber had supposed,⁷² the Matua philosophy clearly shows that the untouchables and the lower castes did not always unquestioningly accept the notions of *karma* which rationalised and legitimised their present position and motivated them only to work for betterment in the next life.⁷³ But this property, which was the source of all power, Guruchand insisted, had to be earned in an honest way and this quest for wealth must not lead to unscrupulous or unbound greed. So the ideal path would be to combine *bhakti* with *karma*, or spiritual devotion with material action. The dictum of '*Hate kam mukhe nam*' (doing worldly duties while chanting His holy name), as Harichand defined it,⁷⁴ became the guiding principle of the Matua philosophy of life. The sect, unlike others of its genre, thus inculcated a work ethic, which was necessary to motivate an upwardly mobile community, still struggling under disparities and obstacles.

But this social mobility, or ambitions to achieve it, also put limits to the contestatory character of the Matua sect and its accommodating tendency gradually became visible in its ideas about gender and patriarchy. The majority of the Namasudra community depended on

agriculture and the primary unit in the organisation of agricultural production was family. Hence Matua sect attached utmost importance to the orderly maintenance of family life in keeping with the values of a settled agricultural society, and advised its disciples to perform *garhasthya dharma* or the duties of a householder.⁷⁵ The sect did not preach a religion of the ascetic, nor did it prescribe *brahmacharya* or continence in the sense of a complete abstinence from sexual intercourse. Guruchand, in contrast to what Ramakrishna was preaching to his middle-class householder disciples,⁷⁶ did not consider *Kamini-kanchan* or women and wealth as obstacles in the path of *bhakti*, nor did he consider women as doorways to hell (*naraker dwar*). Women in Matua philosophy were not desexualised; they were regarded as equal partners in family life, essential to men for reproduction, as soil was important to peasants for continuing the cycle of agricultural production. But this did not mean unbridled sexuality, as the householder was also expected to generate in himself the qualities of an ascetic. The ideal man was he who could control his sexuality. The proper performance of familial duties required a combination of two qualities or *guna*, i.e., *Raja* and *Sattwa*, the former motivated people to work, while the latter elevated them above worldly desires.⁷⁷ The flag of the Matua sect therefore contained two colours: it was in red with a white border – red representing the *Raja* and the white standing for the *Sattwa* qualities.⁷⁸

Family life which was so emphasised in Matua philosophy was thus to be regulated in accordance with strict sexual discipline – chastity of women and proper sexual behaviour by men were virtues repeatedly extolled in the preachings of the *gurus*.⁷⁹ The classical *Bhakti* tradition never allowed licentious behaviour in the name of religion and the lower caste *jat vaishnava* devotees were looked down upon on account of alleged lack of sexual discipline.⁸⁰ This relative laxity in the man–woman relationship and freedom of sexual behaviour, which characterised social relations at the lower stratum of society, were thus stereotyped as immoral, on the ground that they did not conform to the moral standards of the orthodox upper caste society. The elite culture in this way tried to transform or suppress aspects of popular life or sought to modify popular behaviour, in an attempt to sponsor a ‘popular’ or mass culture which conformed to the social ethic of the higher orders. Popular religions, in spite of their initial irreverent tendencies, often ended up by providing theological legitimation for such elitist reformation of the manners and behaviour of the people.⁸¹ The Matua sect also performed the same social role, though it did so to fulfil certain specific needs of the community which constituted its primary clientele.

The Namasudras during their earlier phase of amphibious existence, were known for their 'partiality for spirits and swine's flesh',⁸² as also for their slackness in maintaining sexual discipline and lack of rigid structures in man-woman relationship, which the upper-caste society often stereotyped as lack of morality and manners.⁸³ The alleged laxity, if at all it was real, was, in all probability, partly due to the physical environment, which was not very congenial for the maintenance of well-defined and strictly structured kinship relations. It might also have been partly the legacy of a permissive free-mixing tribal culture. But as these people were gradually transformed into a settled agricultural community and were drawn into the main body of Hindu society, its leaders felt a compulsion to conform to the accepted norms of moral behaviour prescribed for the higher castes of that society. This conformism was necessary for the legitimisation of their new social status, i.e., in order to be accepted into Hindu society and to be regarded as respectable by the fellow Hindus.

The Matua sect therefore attempted a reformation of the manners of the Namasudras at a mass level, and thus also tried to avoid the stigma attached to the other 'deviant' orders. Since within the socially accepted normative system marriage was the only legitimate outlet for human sexuality and sex outside wedlock was looked upon as adultery and thus immoral,⁸⁴ Harichand advised his disciples to enter into family life only in association with properly wedded wives and to regard other women as mothers. Guruchand also instructed the Matua devotees to refrain from adultery, as this would bring infamy to their community.⁸⁵ The theme of proper sexual relationships and behaviour was also popularised through the later devotional songs of the sect.⁸⁶ As the community moved from floating boats to homestead lands, began to acquire occupancy right over reclaimed cultivable fields, accumulated property and enjoyed rights of inheritance, they needed more strictly structured families and social discipline. And this practical need came to be reflected in a number of their devotional songs which portrayed uncontrolled sexual desire as the greatest of the six enemies (*vices or ripu*) of mankind. Ideal love, it was emphasised, was that which was devoid of sexual passion (*akam kamana*), and that was love for Hari, which filled the mind with divine and endless joy.⁸⁷ Thus, at the end of the day, the ideal of desexualised man-woman relationship, which Ramakrishna was preaching among his middle-class disciples, also came to be accepted by the followers of the Matua sect.

Such absorption of philosophical or cultural notions from the established or orthodox religious order symbolised the Namasudras'

inability to escape its dominant ideological influence, and this was also clearly evident in their attitude to the question of 'caste' itself. Although the practices and rituals of the Matua sect had subversive implications for the hierarchy of castes, the Namasudras could never completely come out of the influence of its ideology. In the late 1880s, Risley had found them to be 'very particular as regards caste prejudices', never allowing 'a European to stand or walk over their cooking place'.⁸⁸ Later, as their movement started, they began to demand a higher position within the ritual hierarchy itself and referred to their Brahman origin. Gyan Prakash has recently argued that such an invention of the myths of origin was purported to show that 'one is not born, but rather becomes' a lower caste. In this sense, he thinks, these myths, though expressed in 'the language of caste hierarchy', actually contested the dominant ideology of Hindu caste system which insisted that *jatis* are 'natural' rather than 'cultural' phenomena.⁸⁹ The Namasudra case would, however, show that the Hindu ideology, as it was understood by the people below, did not make a very sharp distinction between 'being' and 'becoming'. While the nineteenth-century dominant stereotype on *jati* focused on 'being', there were competing discourses that invoked the classical notions of *varna* which incorporated the idea of 'becoming'. The two systems of *varna* and *jati*, one representing 'a conceptual scheme' and the other 'real social groups or categories', as André Beteille has put it, were 'different but related' and they remained so 'for at least 2000 years'.⁹⁰ The *varna* scheme, observes Srinivas, provided the ordinary men and women with 'a simple and clear scheme' – 'a common social language' of subcontinental applicability – that made the meaning of rank easily communicable across social and geographical boundaries. The mobility of a *jati* was therefore 'frequently stated in *varna* terms rather than in terms of the local caste situation'.⁹¹ A close examination of the Namasudra case would further suggest that this reference to civilisational categories was also because it was not difficult to find in Hindu mythology notions about losing a higher *varna* status, and also regaining it through a different kind of cultural attainment. If the notions of *jati* and such prevailing ideas about *varna* could jointly be considered to have formed the ideology of 'caste' for the common people, then both 'naturalism' and 'historicity' of ritual rank were parts of it. The lower caste mythology selectively appropriated the *varna* aspect of that ideology and used it to improve their own position within the *jati* structure.

There were in circulation among the Namasudras several myths which can be fitted into a coherent theory implying their original

Brahman status, which was subsequently lost due to various historical circumstances. One legend, cited in the 1891 census report and also by Risley, but not repeated in any of the caste literature of the Namasudras themselves, traced their origin from the son of the Brahman sage Basistha, who was cursed by his father and lost his caste for absolving king Dasaratha who had killed a Brahman boy by mistake.⁹² The other myth, which seems to have been more popular among the Namasudras themselves, connected them to another Brahman sage called Kashyap, who allegedly had sexual intercourse with his wife during her menstrual period. This being considered illicit in the *shastra* (scriptures), the son born of that union had to be exiled in a forest. He lived there with the forest tribes and eventually married a Sudra girl. His successors, in the course of their long stay in forests in association with the Sudra tribes, lost, just as predicted in *Manusmriti* (the most authentic treatise on Hindu law), all their Brahman traits, and some of them even discarded their sacred thread, the most powerful symbol of Brahmanhood. They came to be called Namasudras and settled in Mulghar pargana in Jessore district.⁹³ From this legend followed two other theories, one mythical and canonical and the other more historical. The first one argued that in *Manusmriti*, in 'the eighth sloka in chapter ten', one could find reference to the Parasab Brahmins, who had originated from a Brahman father from his duly wedded Sudra wife. There was no doubt therefore that they were the ancestors of the Namasudras and since the seed must always precede over the soil, also as per *Manusmriti* ('10 ch: 72 sloka'), they should be considered as Brahmins, as a *vyavastha*, signed by 28 Brahman *pundits* from Nabadwip, Burdwan, Hooghly and Murshidabad, actually stipulated.⁹⁴ Moreover, and what was more important too, the *Manusmriti* ('10-64-65') had also prescribed that such degraded people after seven generations would be elevated again to the status of Brahman.⁹⁵ The presentday Namasudras therefore certainly deserved to be considered as Brahmins, it was argued, as neither losing that status was unusual, nor was regaining it against the *shastra*.

But why did they not enjoy that status even after being elevated to Brahmanhood in the seventh generation? This is explained in another story that refers to a historical figure, Ballal Sen, the legendary Sena king who reigned in Bengal in the thirteenth century AD. He is known to have fallen in love with a lower caste girl and forced the Brahmins to participate in a ritual ceremony organised by her. For fear of losing caste through such participation, the Brahmins of Mulghar pargana fled eastwards and to conceal their identity discarded their sacred threads, whereupon the vindictive king degraded them to the status of

Chandala.⁹⁶ The story of this controversial love affair of the Sena king was taken directly from the high-caste Bengalees' own construction of their 'historical' past, in which the episode is referred to as the only regrettable lapse on the part of a king who was otherwise the ardent protector of Hindu society.⁹⁷ The Namasudras used this story for a different social purpose. It historicised their fall from a high ritual status and also strengthened their claim to be reinstated where they were. But it did not, like the other origin myths, ever challenge the ideology of caste ranking which in their understanding incorporated both the ideas of being and becoming, and therefore justified their aspiration for elevation to a higher ritual rank. For this reason, none of these myths ever attempted directly to subvert or invert the hierarchised social structure, since within it rather than outside of it, they sought to define their own social location.

Yet there was implication of subversion in their thinking as well, particularly when their claim to a higher status was based on reason rather than myth; but that too was derived from the dominant discourses of the elites. It was in *Bhagavadgita* that one could find reference to God classifying people into four *varnas* on the basis of qualities and activities,⁹⁸ which meant, one would 'become', and not just naturally 'be', the member of a higher or lower *varna*. So if a Chandala had the requisite qualities, asked one Namasudra, why should he not be considered as a Brahman?⁹⁹ And since all the *varnas*, said others, originated from the body of the supreme lord Brahma and were later differentiated on the basis of qualities, why then this indelible social distinction between castes?¹⁰⁰ This was indeed an argument against the contemporary orthodox version of the caste ideology that focused entirely on birth as a determinant of caste status. But this stereotype was also being challenged by the educated high-caste Bengalees themselves who were referring to the *varna* system being based on qualities, rather than birth.¹⁰¹ And it was from this reformist discourse of the elites that the educated Namasudras derived this notion of functional division of *varna* and it was also at this audience that their arguments were aimed. Today, the power of reason is more than that of the *shastra*, said one of them. The *shastra* says that the degraded mixed castes were created through asymmetrical and therefore illicit sexual union between members of different *varnas*. But how could the ancient law-givers know, he reasoned, who was entering whose room secretly at night and producing which particular child? Isn't therefore this branding of the mixed castes as degraded and defiling a deliberate stereotyping for the purpose of perpetuating the social dominance of the Brahmins? But this

radical reasoned protest against the ideology of caste was indeed a rarity in the whole discourse of the Namasudra movement. The same writer also argues that the Namasudras were not Chandalas, for they had nothing in common with the traditional Chandalas described in the *shastra*.¹⁰² Thus the notional existence of an untouchable Chandal was not questioned, only Namasudra identity was differentiated from that of the Chandalas, and that too on the basis of the *shastra* itself. What we find in this statement is not a negation of the *shastra*, but a reproduction of its ideology so as to use it for authenticating Namasudra claims to a higher ritual status.

The metaphors of Namasudra protest were thus conditioned by the realities of hegemony. In the latter-day myths of the Matua sect, Harichand appears as a Brahman who had lost his caste by marrying a Namasudra woman.¹⁰³ This is an evidence *per excellence* of the accommodating tendency of the Namasudras, the Brahman being considered as the highest being and the woman being stereotyped as a defiling agent. These were the very notions that were being emphasised and popularised again and again in the *puranas* and by the *Smritikaras* from Manu to Raghunandan, down to the early twentieth-century orthodox commentators on *jatimala*, who upheld the dominant cultural values of a hierarchised society.

IV

The Namasudra followers of the Matua sect were thus simultaneously trying to negate the caste ideology of hierarchy and seeking accommodation within the same ritual structure. Resistance or protest, though hidden and inarticulate, thus went hand in hand with conformism or accommodation, the latter tendency being no less powerful than the former. This obvious contradiction was because of a differentiation that had already become a reality of Namasudra collective existence in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. As the movement began, this differentiation and divergence of interests, motives and aspirations became gradually more apparent. While the upwardly mobile section, which provided the leadership to the movement, remained more concerned with ritual status and therefore was more accommodative, the peasants looked for an ideology of protest. And since the Matua sect was the bridge between the two segments, it is no wonder that its beliefs and practices incorporated diverse and often dissimilar ideas.

The social movement of the Namasudras from the very beginning emphasised the myth of Brahman origin and in their very first organised meeting in 1881, Guruchand himself, in his presidential address, spoke about it.¹⁰⁴ Later on they began to appropriate social symbols that had previously been the hallmarks of high status of the purer castes. They had already forbidden their women from visiting the markets and refused to accept menial jobs or serve the higher castes. Now they began to perform the funeral ceremony (*sradh*), like the Brahmans, on the eleventh day of mourning.¹⁰⁵ Child marriage and widow celibacy began to grow in popularity, as in 1911, 22.2 percent of the Namasudra girls in the age group of 5–12 years were either married or widows, the proportion being much higher than that among the traditional higher castes.¹⁰⁶ And along with this, the earlier marriage arrangement of the groom paying a 'bride price' gave place to the high-caste practice of paying dowry, the amount of which gradually went on increasing.¹⁰⁷

The existing discourse of 'Sanskritisation' cannot explain this behaviour adequately, as it ignores the element of protest involved in it. In some cases what such lower caste people were also trying was to appropriate certain symbols of authority and divest them of their symbolic significance. For example, as the lower castes like the Namasudras, Nath-Jugis, etc. began to don the sacred thread,¹⁰⁸ which was the most authentic symbol of ritual authority, the early twentieth-century Bengali *bhadralok* began to call it '*siki paisar suto*' or 'a thread worth a quarter of a penny'.¹⁰⁹ Yet, such behaviour was not entirely, or always, symptomatic of resistance or subversion, as according to the dominant norms of social relations in Hindu society the adoption of the codes of conduct of the purer castes was mandatory to earning respect. Such emulative behaviour of the Namasudras was therefore also the result of the ideological hegemony of the constituted order and was reflective of an accommodative gesture. For substantiating their claim to higher ritual status, *Manusmriti* was therefore frequently referred to, and *vyavasthas* from Brahman *pundits* were secured, as otherwise it would not look authentic or appear convincing to the dominant orthodox society. And along with this, their actual behavioural patterns also had to conform to the prevailing high-caste models. This shows that at least the leaders of the movement, if not the masses, could not visualise a levelling of the social hierarchy, nor the ritual order turned upside down. They were only seeking legitimation for a higher ritual status for themselves within the existing structure.

This legitimation of a higher social status was, however, being attempted at both ritual and secular levels. Signs of 'Westernisation'¹¹⁰

were therefore also discernible in their behaviour, as for the enlightened section of the Namasudras the reference category was not the traditional Vedic Brahman, but the high-caste urban educated elite who had been talking at that time of various social reforms. Hence some of these people also began to speak about the evils of child marriage and the lamentable plight of the widows.¹¹¹ While one argued that widow remarriage was *sadachar* or good conduct and its prohibition a *kadachar* or bad conduct,¹¹² the other questioned why a widow should not be allowed to remarry when a widower was permitted to do so.¹¹³ But above all, their yearning for education and craving for political power within the existing institutional framework were the most typical forms of Westernisation that clearly showed their awareness of the new sinews of power and the new symbols of social status in a colonial society.

As we learn from his disciple biographer, Guruchand often used to tell his followers that the Namasudras, though strong in numbers, were not respected by anybody since they lacked power, and it was power alone which could command respect.¹¹⁴ As his other teachings indicate, he was also conscious of the locus of real power in a colonial state and the opportunities which that state system had created as the new sources of power for a colonised indigenous society. It was education which he thought was the first necessity for the acquisition of power, or in other words, for resisting the domination of the existing power elites. Harichand also had realised that illiteracy and ignorance were the roots of all degradation the Namasudra masses were suffering from and had, therefore, instructed his son to work for the education of the members of his caste. As the Namasudra peasants could not read or write, his son argued further, they were continually exploited and defrauded by the landlords and their agents, and were thus deprived of the legitimate share of the fruits of their own labour. Equally significant was his assertion that education would open the gates to the new world of professions, which would bring further social respectability. Hence no matter whether they had food or not, the Namasudras must educate their children. He stressed this point again and again before his disciples and as a first step towards dissemination of education among his followers, he himself started a *pathsala* (lower primary school) in 1880 in his village Orakandi.¹¹⁵

Later towards the beginning of the twentieth century, fresh efforts, often with the help of the Christian missionaries, were made in various other districts for the spread of education.¹¹⁶ But the progress remained slow. In 1901 only 3.3 per cent of the Namasudras were literate and in 1911 it rose to only 4.9 per cent.¹¹⁷ During the second decade of the twentieth century, the colonial government offered various special

facilities for the education of the Namasudras in the form of special scholarships and free studentships, as well as grants for Namasudra schools and hostels.¹¹⁸ As a result literacy improved further: in 1921, of the Namasudras aged 5 and over, 8.5 per cent were literate.¹¹⁹ And some of these educated Namasudras also made their way into the new world of higher professions, although their number, as it has already been mentioned (see Chapter 1), was really very insignificant. One of the major reasons for such slow progress in the field of education and profession, as the Namasudras believed, was the competition they had to face from the better equipped members of the higher castes.¹²⁰ Hence they began to feel that they deserved special privileges to make good the handicap they suffered from as a result of centuries of social discrimination and economic exploitation. In other words, it was only through the intervention of the superior state power that they could circumvent their handicap. This attitude of the educated Namasudras, trying to carve out a place for themselves in the new competitive world of professions and institutional politics, brought them closer to the colonial government. And as a consequence, they also moved further away from the nationalist movement led, as it was in the early twentieth century, by the high-caste Hindu *bhadralok*.

But such demands for special privileges, in an age dominated by the politics of numbers, could only be made effective through mass mobilisation. Hence, the upwardly mobile leadership of the Namasudra community, by using their caste and religious linkages and by speaking against the high caste *zamindari* oppression in the countryside, also tried to mobilise the peasantry. To achieve greater solidarity within the caste, a number of meetings to discuss various social questions were held from 1881 onwards in different Namasudra villages. The first of these 'uplift meetings', as these were popularly known, was held in 1881 in the house of Iswar Gayen, a Namasudra *zamindar* of village Dattadanga in the Mollarhat police station of Khulna district. It was presided over by Guruchand himself, and was addressed by sixteen other local leaders from different districts. Self-respect and self-confidence to be promoted through self-help and self-reliance were the main subjects of deliberation and as a follow-up measure, it was decided that such meetings should henceforth be held regularly.¹²¹

A series of other meetings followed hereafter. The call to awake to the new day and to take advantage of the widening horizon of institutional opportunities thrown open to everyone irrespective of caste and status, the need for education for both boys and girls, the evils of early marriage, the plaint and plea of the widows, the new ideal of the fatherhood of God

and the brotherhood of men, were the subjects that furnished material for several hours of speech-making on every occasion. Attendance sometimes reached up to two thousand. The funeral ceremonies in prosperous households were followed by community feasts, where sometimes thousands of people were fed. On such occasions, before the people dispersed again, it became 'customary' to hold an uplift meeting. We find reference to one such meeting held some time in 1910, in the house of a wealthy Namasudra, Ram Charan Poddar of Khulna, after the funeral ceremony of his mother. The meeting began at 3pm. Speech followed speech, voicing their newborn hopes and aspirations. Evening fell, flickering oil lamps were hung around the huge tent and the meeting continued well after 9pm.¹²²

Apart from such meetings, itinerant preachers began to visit Namasudra villages disseminating the message of their social movement among the peasantry. As dramatical forms of expression were expected to have greater imprint on the popular mind, the notions of their high ritual status and myths surrounding it formed the subjects of regular *jatra* performances (a form of folk theatre) staged by the 'Namasudra Natyasamaj', a theatrical group constituted for this specific purpose.¹²³ Then subscriptions were collected even from illiterate peasants for the publication of books containing their origin myths. Not only was something in print considered to be of authentic value to the masses, but a payment of subscription, even as humble an amount as one Rupee, was expected to generate in them a sense of involvement in the movement.¹²⁴

But along with such informal, and rather impromptu methods, more formal conferences were also held periodically to mobilise mass opinion. In their Jessore conference in 1908, it was resolved that this Namasudra conference would be made a regular feature of their community life and annual meetings would be organised in different districts for the discussion of their social problems and the spread of education. Village committees were to be formed in every Namasudra village and fifteen such villages would constitute a union, with a district committee supervising the work of all such local bodies in a district. To raise a permanent Namasudra fund, all such committees at various levels were to be authorised to collect subscriptions. A handful of rice, or *mushti*, had to be set aside before meals in every family household and collected weekly by the village committees. Every member of the village committee was supposed to pay a monthly subscription of one *anna*, those of the union committees two *annas* and of the district committees four *annas*. Three per cent of the expenses incurred in *sradh*, marriage and other social ceremonies in every Namasudra family had to be

donated to this fund. And apart from this, measures were also advocated for social reform. It was resolved that any Namasudra marrying his son under 20 years or daughter under 10 years would be excommunicated.¹²⁵

Though the social reform programme, as the available evidence suggests, could not actually commence, the organisational scheme suggested in the conference certainly indicated the intentions of the Namasudra leaders to broaden the base of their movement through participation of every member of the community. This was to be secured by means of a regular subscription, monitored by an intricate network of local organisations. The very idea of village organisation as a means of mass mobilisation had immense potential, as in most districts where the Namasudras were numerous, there were villages exclusively inhabited by them.¹²⁶ Here the *matbars* or village headmen exercised absolute control over the populace and could instantly mobilise thousands of people whenever the need arose.¹²⁷ It was these informal community bonds at the mass level which the leaders now attempted to harness and gave a formal organisational form to strengthen their social movement.

But it was really the Matua sect which offered an organisation for the social movement of the Namasudra community that had already developed fissures and divergent tendencies. Not only did Guruchand's teachings motivate the community to become more self-assertive, but he himself, with his influence as a charismatic religious preceptor, became the leader of their social movement, and Orakandi, his ancestral village, became its headquarters. One of his dispensations, '*jar dal nei tar bal nei*',¹²⁸ i.e., 'those who do not form a group do not have power', conveyed the message of organising for collective action. It was around this sect that the initial mobilisation of the Namasudras took place, as the original disciples of Guruchand, known as the 'sixty-four *mohantas*', preached the ideas of Hari-Guruchand and gathered around them thousands of devotees from the Namasudra population of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore and Tippera districts.¹²⁹ Their most popular religious festival was *Baruni mela*, held to celebrate the birth anniversary of Harichand on the last day of the Bengali month *Chaitra* (in April). At different places, the most important of them being Orakandi and Lakshmikhali, the *mela* (fair) attracted thousands of devotees across the local boundaries.¹³⁰ The occasion thus offered an excellent opportunity for social mobilisation and communication of the message of social movement in an informal and less organised way. The devotional songs of the sect, by popularising the myths of their exalted origin,¹³¹ served the same purpose of generating self-respect and community consciousness at the grassroots level.

The leaders of the Namasudra community now began to use this religious platform in a more systematic way for organising a social movement against their degraded condition. To bring the sect under a centralised organisational framework, a Matua Mahasangha was started some time before 1915, through the initiative of one of those early disciples, Tarak Gosain. P. R. Thakur, Guruchand's grandson, after his return from England, thought of reactivating this social organisation and convened at Orakandi a general conference of the Matua devotees in 1931.¹³² The following year, the endeavour of Gopal Sadhu gave the Sangha the organisational shape of a 'mission', with an *ashram* started at Khulna district town on a plot of hundred *bigha* of land, where Namasudra students, coming from poor peasant families, could stay and continue their studies.¹³³ Through this organisational network, gradually developed in the early twentieth century, the upper echelon of the community could effectively reach the grassroots level, already stirred up by a new sense of self-respect, and communicate their message of a social and eventually political movement. The other community organisations of a more political nature, such as the Namasudra Hitaishini Samiti, started in Dacca in February 1902,¹³⁴ and the Bengal Namasudra Association, started in 1912 with its twenty-two district units,¹³⁵ maintained a close relationship with this socio-religious organisation, as it offered the most convenient means for mass contact. It was in this way that the leaders of the Namasudra community systematically tried to convert their strength of numbers into a source of political power – a political imperative which Guruchand himself had drawn their attention to.

V

Never in the past could the Namasudras fully identify themselves socially or culturally, with the high-caste Hindus. Although the two segments within the community had different aspirations, interests and ambitions, they shared a common desire to defy the authority of the higher castes who had dominated them socially and economically for such a long time. Therefore, like the Bengali Muslims,¹³⁶ the Namasudras of Bengal also developed in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries a separate social and cultural identity which was distinct from and opposed to that of the high-caste Hindus. This gradually pushed them away from the mainstream of nationalist politics in Bengal, dominated by the latter social group. This alienation was rooted in an ideology that emanated from their own reconstruction of the

past and perception of the present. In contrast to the caste discrimination and economic exploitation of the past centuries, colonial rule to them seemed to be more liberal and egalitarian. This perception of history stood in sharp contrast to that of the Hindu nationalists. As the latter glorified the pre-colonial past, the Namasudras considered British rule to be a marked improvement over the tyrannical regimes of the contemptuous Hindu Rajas and Brahmans. The nationalist endeavour to put an end to foreign rule seemed to be an attempt to put the clock back, a desperate effort to regain their slipping control over the society.¹³⁷ As a result of this strong sense of alienation, born of both caste and class hatred, the Bengali word *jati* began to acquire different meanings. While for the high-caste Hindu Bengalees of the early twentieth century, the word had become synonymous with the English word 'nation', and it had come to mean 'all the inhabitants of British India',¹³⁸ in the Namasudra lexicon the nation seemed to have been effectively displaced by caste. One of the leaders of the Namasudra community wrote in 1921: 'Motherland is greater than heaven, say the wise men; but one's own caste is greatest of all, can there be anything comparable to it!'¹³⁹ And, as we shall find in the subsequent chapters of this book, this consciousness, articulated first at the top of the community structure, was also shared at the bottom, as the alienation was complete and all-embracing.

This feeling of attachment to colonial rule might also have been, to a large extent, the result of the philanthropic work of the different government agencies and of the Christian missionaries, who had long been trying to win over such depressed communities, the 'human debris of India', as a Bishop of Madras once described them. As the high-caste educated people dashed their hopes of an expansion of Christianity, it was 'the pariah community, and not the Brahmin', that began to occupy 'the position of highest strategic value' for such missionary activities.¹⁴⁰ To give a few examples, in eastern Bengal, there was a severe famine in Faridpur in 1894. The main affected areas were Madaripur, Gopalganj and Kotalipara Police stations in Madaripur subdivision. At the initial stage the Faridpur Suhrid Sabha, a local nationalist organisation, took initiative to provide relief to the famine stricken people and the beneficiaries included a sizeable section of the local Namasudras. But soon the *samiti* ran out of funds; then the assistance coming through the government, district board and the missionaries became the only relief available for the famished villagers.¹⁴¹ Similarly, during the famine of 1906, the areas which were most affected were the marshy regions of Faridpur and Bakarganj. The worst sufferers were the poorer classes of peasants who had no ploughs or land of their own and the poorer

high-caste *bhadralok* who depended for their livelihood entirely upon a small patrimony. The Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, another nationalist organisation under the guidance of Aswini Kumar Datta, the charismatic nationalist leader of Bakarganj, organised relief work in the famine stricken areas. But while the *swadeshi* relief fund, as it was alleged, 'was largely used for the benefit of the "bhadralok" classes', the Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, did excellent work among the distressed Namasudra peasants of the *bil* tracts, in co-operation with the government officials.¹⁴² This naturally brought the Namasudras closer to the Christian missionaries.

But closest to them was an Australian Baptist missionary, Dr C. S. Mead. The Orakandi school which had been started with humble resources by Guruchand himself, soon needed further financial assistance for sustenance, as the local Kayastha *zamindar* refused to help. Appeals were, therefore, sent to Mead, then stationed at the district headquarter of Faridpur. Orakandi being 'the most influential centre of the Namasudra world', the missionary felt that 'this strategic centre should be occupied'.¹⁴³ In a meeting held at Orakandi in early 1905, Mead promised to help and pleaded for a piece of land, both for the school and a mission. Although many Namasudra elders and their priests were hesitant and suspicious about the ulterior motive of this missionary, the leader stood firm, and himself donated a plot of land on which Mead started his mission in 1906, initially in a tent.¹⁴⁴ Apart from teaching gospel to the Namasudras, with the assistance of Rev. H. Sutton, Mead also ran a charitable dispensary. The elementary school for boys was raised to the status of a high school, where about two hundred boys came to study from different villages across rivers and marshes. A day school and a Sunday school for girls were opened under the supervision of Miss Tuck. The Widows' Home at Orakandi, looked after by Nurse Thomson, provided shelter to a number of destitute Namasudra widows, while Miss Kamala Bose, a Christian Bengali young lady, started working among the Namasudra women at Gopalganj, about twenty miles away.¹⁴⁵ All these activities were made possible as local support was provided by Guruchand and his followers. Before his departure from India, Mead openly acknowledged: 'In the various activities of my missionary life he [Guruchand] has made possible many things that without his backing could not have been carried through.'¹⁴⁶

The expression of gratitude was reciprocated. As a Namasudra paper put it, 'the Christians [are] lifting the rock from off us, and we are getting a chance to rise, but we do not know how to express the gratitude we so deeply feel'.¹⁴⁷ But this gratitude, as we already have mentioned

earlier, did not result in any mass conversion to Christianity. The Faridpur Mission could convert only two Namasudra families before 1911.¹⁴⁸ This illustrates what Rev Sutton had pointed out that the Namasudras had 'imbibe[ed] just so much of the Christian spirit as . . . [would] enable them to forge ahead to a place of independence and respectability'.¹⁴⁹

What the missionaries could more or less successfully achieve was to widen the cleavage between the nationalists and this ambitious social group. Political agitations were as much a problem for the missionaries as it was for the government, because they 'widened the gulf between Indians and Europeans, thus setting the missionary in a very difficult position'.¹⁵⁰ Mead, therefore, projected himself as the benefactor of the Namasudras, won their gratitude, tried to ensure their loyalty to the government and on a number of occasions acted as a liaison between the two sides. Similarly, in other districts as well, the Namasudra leaders sought the counsel and assistance of the missionaries for establishing schools and hostels and for organising programmes for uplifting their community. That help was readily given by people like Rev. P. Noble in Dacca, Rev. Sutton at Mymensingh, Mr Burry at Comilla, Mr J. Read at Jessore, Mr Carey at Barisal and Miss Beckingsale at Tipperah.¹⁵¹ Because of the philanthropic activities they were undertaking, the missionaries easily gained the confidence of these people and consequently yielded considerable influence over them. Most of the Namasudra villagers believed, as a 1906 report of the New Zealand Baptist Mission clearly indicated, that the 'missionaries were in reality Government agents, or at least in the pay of the Government'.¹⁵² Their sense of gratitude towards the missionaries could therefore easily be converted into friendliness towards the government. When the nationalist movement began to pick up momentum and pressures were brought to bear upon the Namasudras to join it, as Rev. P. Noble of Dacca Baptist Mission noted with pride, 'the missionaries were able to exercise a steadying influence and helped the masses to maintain their loyalty to Government'. There was a tiny group opposed to the Christian missionaries; but the majority were friendly and 'thoroughly loyal to Government'.¹⁵³ Rev. Noble eventually became the Vice President of the Dacca Namasudra Samiti.¹⁵⁴ This organisation, along with its counterpart in Faridpur which Dr Mead was closely associated with, later sent deputations to the government expressing unflinching loyalty of the Namasudra community to the British Raj.

However, such overt exhibition of loyalty could be seen only among the upwardly mobile section of the Namasudra community and they felt

enthusiastic about it since institutional incentives, as already mentioned, were constantly forthcoming from the colonial government. One such major incentive was certainly the census operations. The tendency of compartmentalising and stereotyping Indian society in terms of primordial categories in the census reports resulted in a reinforced caste consciousness among such groups. Many of them in Bengal, as in other parts of India, began to claim better status in census returns, for they believed that those recognised as higher castes in the census would get from the government extra benefits, which others would remain deprived of.¹⁵⁵ But these census agitations had another dimension too: these were attempts by the submerged groups to achieve a higher social status which the Hindu society would not otherwise grant them.¹⁵⁶ Hence in a way these were also attempts to subvert the dominance of the indigenous power elites of Hindu society by referring to a higher source of political power, i.e., the colonial state. At the time of the census operation of 1891, the Namasudras therefore, submitted several petitions for recognition of their new caste name. But their demand was not fully met, as in the caste tables of that year they were shown as 'Namasudra or Chandal'. The word Namasudra was added, for otherwise 'serious troubles might have ensued'.¹⁵⁷

In 1901 the Namasudras of the districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Mymensingh, Jessore and Pabna once again appealed to the government. Bhishmadel Das and several other members of the Namasudra Association of Orakandi sent a representation pleading for the designation of Namasudra, with the old despising name 'Chandala' being dropped. In support of their claims they also submitted copies of *vyavastha* or opinion of several *pundits* of Bengal.¹⁵⁸ What is more important, although the high-caste Bengali population of the region ridiculed them for putting forward such a demand,¹⁵⁹ the local officials such as the Collector of Dacca, the Officiating Magistrate of Bakarganj or the Magistrate in charge of census work in Faridpur, all supported them and recommended the use of the new term 'Namasudra' in the census returns.¹⁶⁰ The situation made the political matrix very clear to the Namasudras, with the local high caste elites opposing their social aspirations and the colonial state, at least its local representatives, supporting them. But even then, their request was not fully respected. The agitation was, therefore, renewed again when the census operations of 1911 were instituted, threatening disturbance of peace in several places.

So much consternation was not only to secure a symbolic and official recognition of their higher ritual status. Around this time, as we have

already mentioned, many of the depressed caste leaders, Guruchand for example, believed that the major factor responsible for their backwardness in the spheres of education and profession was the unequal competition with the traditionally privileged upper castes. They could overcome this handicap only with the help of superior state power. This perception in Bengal was fostered in the late nineteenth century by the government policy of 'special protection' for the Muslims, designed to ensure, as a Government document emphasised back in 1886, 'due distribution of places of emoluments so as to prevent the depression of a numerous and influential class'.¹⁶¹ Similar preferential treatment was also being offered to the backward castes in other provinces of India. In 1881, the Bombay government, for example, had 'laid down the important principle that in distributing public patronage endeavour should be made to secure a due admixture of the various races and castes in the service of Government'. Such a policy was formulated not merely to pay attention to the special needs of the backward communities, but also to break the monopoly of power enjoyed by the higher castes which supplied the largest number of participants in the nationalist agitation.¹⁶²

In Bengal the very partition of the province in 1905 was designed not merely to elevate the Muslim community from its backwardness, but at the same time to strike at the roots of power of the high caste Bengali *bhadralok*, who had by now been stereotyped as the principal troublemakers for the colonial government in the province. Hence the new administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam, through its employment and educational policies and favoured treatment to the Muslims sought to destroy what Richard Cronin has called the 'class rule' by the Hindu landowning, money-lending, professional and clerical classes, mainly belonging to the three traditional higher castes, the Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas.¹⁶³ It was precisely these people that the Namasudra protest was from the very beginning directed against and it was no wonder therefore that in such policies of 'protective discrimination' the leaders of the community could see possibilities of fulfilment of their own goals. The calculations of the colonial government and the aspirations of the Namasudra elites thus perfectly coincided. The nationalist leadership, on the other hand, whether moderate or extremist, could not offer any effective alternative social, economic or political programme for accommodating the aspirations of the Namasudra or similar other lower-caste leaders to integrate them into the political mainstream. The failure became quite apparent during the anti-partition agitation – the first major political movement since the beginning of the Namasudra protest.

But more significant is the fact that this alienation from nationalist politics was not just an elite affair. This attitude was shared by the Namasudra peasantry as well. The leadership, by constantly harping on the basic caste and class contradictions between them and the high-caste gentry, successfully dissuaded them from joining the nationalist agitation that had come to be associated with the latter social group. On the other hand, there was nothing on the nationalist agenda that could alleviate their fear or improve the conditions of the lower-caste masses. There were of course some individuals among the high-caste nationalists who were aware of the problem.¹⁶⁴ But at an organised level, the Indian National Congress continued to avoid social or religious reform for being extremely sensitive and divisive issues. The local leaders therefore had little option but to accept, support and publicly rationalise such policies.¹⁶⁵ The result was a growing alienation of the lower caste peasantry from the nationalist movement. The problem became really acute and apparent during the Swadeshi agitation, which we shall examine later in detail (Chapter 3). The suspicion that was generated on this occasion could not be dispelled, even by Gandhi's charismatic influence, and continued through the days of Non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements.

But this rejection of nationalist politics by the Namasudra peasants should not be regarded as 'separatism' or a manifestation of their loyalty to the Raj. This was in reality an expression of their protest against the social and economic injustices perpetrated on them by the landed classes belonging to the three upper castes, who now dominated nationalist politics in Bengal. The peasants, as the subsequent chapters of this study will reveal, had little understanding of the institutional politics and were much less concerned about the concessions that their leaders were asking for. Their attitude towards the government was rather ambivalent. They preferred the distant ruler to the oppressors nearby, particularly as the former offered protection against the latter. But whenever in the name of maintaining law and order the authorities sided with the landed classes or the higher castes, the Namasudra peasants did not even hesitate to take up arms against the state machinery. What was constant in their behaviour was an articulate demand for what Kathleen Gough has defined as 'ethnic freedom'.¹⁶⁶ To achieve this, they sometimes colluded with the Muslims against the high caste Hindus, sometimes collaborated with the government against the nationalists and sometimes stood against all.

VI

Their relationship with the Muslims was another important and interesting aspect of the emerging sense of self-respect and community consciousness among the Namasudra peasantry. Communal conflicts in India have so far been explained either in terms of a class-community continuum or of the inherent religiosity of the people in a traditional society, elite manipulation or the lack of it adding another dimension to such interpretative models. But the Namasudra-Muslim relations in eastern Bengal in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries reveal that there were also some other important social imperatives behind such communal violence. For the submerged groups collective action was often necessary to establish their self-image or assert their self-respect, and in so doing, to defy the accepted norms of reverence that had hitherto subjected them to social humiliation. Such attempts at self-affirmation required a breaking of the barriers of deference that involved them in frictions, often violent, with those who were used to being revered. Such conflicts further strengthened the exclusivist ethos of a community, by identifying and distinguishing its members from the others. The lines of demarcation between the communities were thus more sharply drawn, separating 'us' from 'them' in more direct and categorical terms.

In the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries an articulate community-consciousness had developed both among the Bengali Muslims and the Namasudras. Two large compact bodies of people, both sensitive about the honour of their communities, were thus living side by side. Each considered themselves to be superior to the other and slightest offence to any member was regarded as an affront to the entire community which required immediate redress. As a result, a series of riots broke out between the two communities, the first of it being in 1889 in the district of Khulna. There on a *hat* (weekly market) day at Gazirhat, a place about 15 to 20 miles north of Khulna, a petty quarrel took place among some Namasudras and Muslims over bargaining on the price of some betel-nuts. The Namasudras took the offensive and led by their caste men of village Jamurshia, beat the Muslims. Not satisfied with this, particularly as police had arrived and put a stop to fighting on that day, they again assembled next morning in large numbers, armed with spears and shields. But the police once again did not allow any outbreak of violence and dispersed them promptly. In revenge, about five to six thousand Muslims assembled the next day. The Namasudras also prepared to resist; but in a free fight that ensued the Muslims had the

best of it, as they were armed with guns. The village of Jamurshia, predominantly inhabited by the Namasudras, was then freely looted and burnt. Later about forty Muslims were convicted and about a dozen Namasudras were also sent up for trial for unlawful assembly. Though the latter were convicted initially, they were later acquitted on appeal.¹⁶⁷ This riot was only the beginning of a series that took place over the years at regular intervals, all caused by petty disputes. This one was in fact of a relatively minor nature, both in terms of number of people mobilised or the area affected, as well as of the magnitude of violence perpetrated, compared with those that occurred later, for example in 1911, in 1923–25, in 1938 or in 1943–44.

Indeed, such communal tension became a regular feature of the relationship between the Namasudra and Muslim peasantry, although at an upper level there had been occasional political understanding of the common issue of opposing the nationalist movement. An articulate community consciousness developing among both these peasant groups is perhaps the only explanation for this continued tension and frequent outbreak of communal violence. The Muslims for generations considered the Namasudras as inferior people and were always determined to assert their superiority. The Namasudras, on the other hand, were also a group of hardy people, and from the late nineteenth century they had started claiming to be equals, and sometimes even superior, to the Muslims. They now refused to serve the Muslims, with the result that the latter had to employ immigrant and therefore expensive labour. In addition, as Muslims were in the habit of using the abusive term *Chanral* while referring to the Namasudras, the latter also began to call them *Nerey*. As a result constant friction over land and *hat* became a regular feature of their collective existence.¹⁶⁸ Sometimes, such frictions led to riots, the initiative in almost all cases coming from the Namasudras. In areas where they did preponderate largely, their 'haughty attitude', as the local officials complained, led to breaches of peace. The Muslims retaliated later, and in most cases got the better of their adversaries.¹⁶⁹

The Namasudra-Muslim relations during the period under study cannot, however, be stereotyped as simply a relationship of conflict. Normally, despite tension, the Namasudras did co-exist peacefully with the Muslims. On a number of occasions, as we shall see, there was active co-operation between the two communities, when they made common cause against the high-caste Hindus on various social and economic issues. There were also occasional political alignments between the leaders of the two communities, particularly regarding opposing

nationalist agitations, such as the Swadeshi or the Civil Disobedience movements. Their alienation from Congress politics was so well known that the colonial Intelligence department by 1930 became confident that 'the Muhammadans and the Namasudras are solidly anti-Congress'.¹⁷⁰ Before 1946-47, only once were the two communities in opposite political camps, i.e., during the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movements, and this had precipitated a series of violent frictions over a large territory in the districts of Bakarganj and Faridpur (see Chapter 4).

In much the same way were the Muslim and Namasudra identities constructed in the late nineteenth-century Bengal. It was an ideology of protest that these identities were woven around. In the case of the Namasudras, the protest was against disrespect and degradation, against deprivation and exploitation – all perpetrated by the high-caste Hindu elites. It was this ideology which defined the community and distinguished its members from its other. When the Muslims or the colonial government helped them in their quest for honour, they were their friends; when they did not, they were their foes. This ideology was perceived and responded to variously by the different sections of the community. But these varied responses also converged at one point and could therefore be organised and co-ordinated into one movement. An ideological community was thus constructed. But there were also limits of ideology and vulnerable joints in solidarity. As protest was conceived within the context of domination, the dominant ideology also put limits to the imagination of those who conceived it, i.e., the upwardly mobile leadership. Their protest was not prepared to go all the way to a complete subversion or dismantling of the existing social structure. The movement therefore oscillated in a continuum of hidden protest, open revolt and accommodative behaviour. As it made progress, it also became clear that it incorporated two different levels of consciousness and two different forms of action, both intertwined in a single movement through skilful use of unificatory rhetorics, subversive symbols and regenerative myths – the *swadeshi* period (1905-11) witnessing them all.

Chapter 3

Social Mobility and Politics in the Swadeshi Era, 1905–1911

On 4 July 1905 it became publicly known from the Secretary of State's statement in the House of Commons, that the final sanction had been given to the long debated scheme of partitioning Bengal. Four days later the Government Resolution was published in the Calcutta papers. Early in August, Congress in Calcutta called for the boycott of English piece goods and other imported articles and advocated the use of their *swadeshi* substitutes. The movement rapidly gained sympathy of the educated community all over Bengal. Soon the *zamindars* took it up and through their *naibs* (agents) and peons, began to forbid the use of European goods by their *raiyats*.¹ Still the main problem before the *swadeshi* leaders was regarding the mobilisation of the masses. By the end of 1906 the agitation began to lose much of its vitality, not merely because the masses did not respond to the solicitations of the agitators,² but because they were now resisting the pressures more sturdily than they were able to do at first.³ During these early years of the *swadeshi* movement, apart from some occasional attempts to mobilise the Hindu masses, the main attention of the leaders was focused on the problem of mobilising the Muslims,⁴ who were by now more or less convinced that 'the Partition would be a boon to them and that their special difficulties would receive greater attention from the new administration.'⁵ The government at this time, was also primarily preoccupied with the task of ensuring the loyalty of this particular section of the population of Eastern Bengal.⁶ None of them, it seems, had been sufficiently aware of the fact that the Namasudras were also thinking along the same lines. In 1905, on behalf of the Dacca Namasudra Hetaishini Samiti, Nagarbasi Mazumdar and Raghunath Sarkar met Sir Bampfylde Fuller, the Lieutenant Governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. They apprised him of the socio-economic condition of the Namasudra community and demanded similar political rights as those granted to the Muslims.⁷

Later Sashi Bhusan Thakur, the eldest son of Guruchand, made contacts with Nawab Salimullah of Dacca and together they decided that the Muslims and the Namasudras would not support the movement against partition and jointly they would offer resistance to any move for its annulment.⁸ This political attitude later on became clearly discernible in a number of Namasudra resolutions adopted in the course of the year 1906. One such resolution, unanimously adopted towards the end of the year, stated that it was 'simply owing to the dislike and hatred of the Brahmins, the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas that this vast Namasudra community has remained backward; this community has, therefore, not the least sympathy with them and their agitation, and will henceforth work hand in hand with their Mahomedan brethren'.⁹ In another such resolution passed at a meeting held at Orakandi in Faridpur on 2 October 1906, they expressed their gratitude to the Secretary of State 'for his declaring the partition of Bengal as a settled fact and admissible of no amendment'.¹⁰ The motivation behind such unequivocal support for one of the most criticised policies of the British government can easily be detected from another resolution, passed around the same time in a similar meeting which prayed 'most earnestly that the Hon'ble Mr. Hare will bestow the same rights and privileges upon the Namasudras as have been done upon the Mahomedans, in as much as the Namasudras and the Mahomedans are the predominating communities of Eastern Bengal'.¹¹

In this political stand of the Namasudra leadership during the early years of the *swadeshi* movement, we can, therefore, identify two basic features – alignment with the Muslims and attachment to the British. Material calculations no doubt prompted such a course of action, as the educated Namasudras now were looking for 'proportional representation in public employment', so that they could get jobs with less qualification than the high-caste Hindus.¹² But apart from this, there were certain other sentiments and influences involved as well. We learn from a poem '*Musalman*', published in a Namasudra journal, *Pataka*, in 1917, that the alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras was viewed as a union of two outcaste peasant communities equally despised and exploited by the high-caste Hindu gentry.¹³ This served as an adequate justification for their decision to offer joint resistance to a movement which was led and supported by such high-caste Hindu landlords and to express in no uncertain terms their preference for the British government.

The events of 1906, however, made the nationalist leadership aware of the situation and conscious of the fact that unless they could mobilise this large agrarian caste, their movement had little chance of success.

This prompted them to undertake a series of attempts to secure their support, sometimes through persuasion and sometimes through the use of force, as social ostracism which had become a very handy method of forcing reluctant people to observe *swadeshi* had no effect on an untouchable caste having no social rights whatsoever. In Faridpur, in early 1907, Ambika Charan Mazumdar, the foremost among the *swadeshi* leaders of that district, visited different places in the Madaripur subdivision, one of the principal Namasudra areas and held a number of boycott meetings, which were reported to have been 'fairly successful'.¹⁴ In continuation of these initial efforts, the draft resolution of the proposed Faridpur District Conference, which was scheduled to commence on 13 July 1907, tried to make political use of an old grievance of the Namasudras against their being employed as scavengers in jails. The sixth resolution ran as follows:

That this conference strongly protests against the degrading treatment to which Namasudras as a class are wrongly subjected in the jails, and which is not only highly repugnant to their feelings, but also acts as a social stigma upon their caste and this conference strongly urges that regular sweepers should be provided for serving the jail population.¹⁵

But the conference itself was prohibited by the Magistrate of Faridpur under Section 3 of the Public Meetings Ordinance of 1907, when the promoters refused to delete certain other 'objectionable' parts of the resolution as suggested by the government.¹⁶ On this occasion, however, the Faridpur District Association was born, with Ambika Mazumdar as its President.¹⁷ In the second half of September, on the eve of the *pujas*, the Association circulated a printed letter calling upon the shopkeepers to refrain from importing foreign goods for the *pujas*.¹⁸ At the same time Mazumdar undertook an extensive tour through the south of the district, advocating purchase of only country goods for the Durga Puja, although to avoid government interference he made no mention of 'boycott'.¹⁹ The political significance of this particular tour can be assessed properly if we bear in mind the demographic character of southern Faridpur, where most of the local Namasudras lived in the swamp areas.

Apart from such direct method of approach through political meetings, the Faridpur District Association took recourse to other means which the government described as 'a species of bribery' by which it tried to gain 'an influence over villages where the *swadeshi* spirit had not a spontaneous and independent existence'.²⁰ As an example, the case of the Dhalgram national school may be cited. In the village of

Dhalgram, 'inhabited almost entirely by Namasudras', a school was run in the house of a well-to-do member of the same caste with thirty-seven pupils coming from the same community. In 1906, the school house being in a dilapidated condition, the Namasudras asked their landlords Chandra Bilash and Kunja Bilash Mukherjee for assistance, which was promised, provided they would take the *swadeshi* vow. Having no other resort, the villagers agreed to oblige and the school was saved. Later, when the Faridpur District Association was trying to gain control over primary education in the district, the school received a monthly grant of two rupees, on condition that the students would continue to take the vow.²¹ In March 1908, in the first annual conference of the Faridpur District Association, Ambika Charan Mazumdar, in his presidential address, made no secret of his political ambition to mobilise the entire Namasudra community in support of his movement. If they too joined hands with the Muslims and stayed away from *swadeshi*, he feared, there was truly no future for this politics.²²

In Bakarganj, Aswini Kumar Datta and his Swadesh Bandhab Samiti were making similar efforts to enlist the support of the Namasudras in the agitation. Datta, who was often referred to as the 'crownless king of Barisal', through his personal conduct tried to eliminate untouchability and alleviate the suspicions of the Namasudras. In the field of education, his close friendship with the Namasudra leader Bhyagai Halder of village Aguljhara went a long way in spreading education and enlightenment among the lower caste peasantry. He started, with the students of his Brajamohan Vidyalay, an organisation called the 'Little Brothers of the Poor', which was given a formal shape in 1889. Its main purpose, as that of Kalishchandra Aturashram founded in 1894, was to serve distressed people, particularly disease-stricken, irrespective of caste and religion.²³ Apart from this, village *samitis* were also formed to mobilise the villagers and teach them the principles of self-help and self-government. For this purpose, arbitration *samitis* were started which decided their cases and suits and curtailed their legal expenses. One such *samiti* is said to have operated successfully during the second year of the *swadeshi* movement in the village of Tarachar, inhabited by the Namasudras, who were thus saved from the 'the dreadful jaws of litigation'. The villagers were reported to have given up registering their documents and instead began to execute documents by putting thumb impressions in the presence of five *mandals* (headmen) of the village. If anybody denied the execution of the document, he was to be subjected to social discipline and punished.²⁴

Apart from this, as a government report reveals, in the following year the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, through its rural branches, 'made the most

sustained and vigorous effort to enmesh the Muhammadan peasantry and the Namasudras in its net'. They were induced to attend meetings and were promised social and other favours if they participated in the *swadeshi* movement. Leaders like Aswini Datta, Satish Chandra Chatterjee and other volunteers like Nishi Kanta Bose and Srish Chandra Ray, went round the interior of the district, delivering speeches which the government considered as of 'the most objectionable character'.²⁵ The most important of such tours was perhaps the one undertaken by Aswini Datta himself in Swarupkati and Jhalakati police stations in the rains of 1907, around the middle of June. He visited places like Masiani, Garangal, Kaukhali, Juluhar and Nazirpur, addressed largely attended meetings, had close talks with the Muslim and Namasudra peasants, persuaded them to use *swadeshi* goods and boycott English courts.²⁶ Simultaneously with this, rumours were systematically spread in these areas that the oppressive 'Assam laws' were going to be introduced soon, that the government would take over all lands, new taxes would be imposed on coconut and date trees,²⁷ as well as on betel nut and plaintain trees. Hindu widows would be forced to remarry, and above all, people in large numbers would be packed off to Assam to serve as tea garden coolies.²⁸ Political demonstrations also continued in the predominantly Namasudra areas such as the Gaurnadi *thana*.²⁹ Pamphlets were published, such as the *Swadeshi Sangeet*, which stated that 'the English mix the fat of the cow and the pig with salt' and 'the bone of the cow' with sugar.³⁰

In the district of Dacca, the Anushilan Samiti of Pulin Das recruited low caste *lathials* (clubmen) and thus tried to win the sympathy of such elements in rural society.³¹ But mostly the poor Namasudras in this district were subjected to intimidation and coercion when found buying foreign goods during the *puja* holidays.³² A particularly flagrant incidence of this variety occurred at Sholla, where in late October 1907, a party of young men visited the quarter inhabited by the Namasudras in a boat and conducted a series of door-to-door searches with a view to seeing that no foreign goods were used. In one instance they are said to have offered to strip a woman of the cloth she was wearing on the ground that it was foreign. Generally, their proceedings were so violent that three distinct prosecutions were initiated by the persons manhandled. But it was reported that, as the accused were chiefly young men of good birth and influence, the complainants were induced to withdraw most of their charges. The government feared that the prosecution might prove pointless except perhaps in the case of some of the minor offenders.³³ And this was precisely what was to happen.

In spite of the efforts of the government, only two persons could be sentenced to four months' imprisonment and the attempts to enforce the boycott by coercive means went on unabated.³⁴ In fact, such coercion had become a common practice in a wide area of Eastern Bengal, particularly in districts like Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh where Hindu *zamindars* were strictly prohibiting the sale and use of foreign piece goods in their respective *zamindaris* 'on pain of heavy fine or sound shoe-beating'.³⁵

The Namasudra leaders like Guruchand, his son Sashi Bhusan and their associates were also active in counteracting such nationalist attempts to mobilise the peasantry. They assiduously tried to dissuade their caste people from joining the boycott movement on the grounds that *swadeshi* was the slogan of the rich, educated *zamindars* who had always in the past ignored the interests of the poor Namasudras. It was a movement of the rich people for furthering their own self-interest and the poor peasants had no interests involved in it. The Partition would not affect the Namasudras, while its withdrawal would not bring any special benefit to them. On the contrary, the Namasudras might profit from loyalty to the foreign rulers who believed in social equality. So the movement was entirely in the interest of the rich, while they wanted to put its burden on the shoulders of the poor Namasudras who purchased foreign goods only because these were cheap. Those nationalist leaders, as Guruchand emphasised, who were now trying to secure their support for the *swadeshi* movement, had not uttered a single word in the past against *zamindari* oppression or against the inhuman treatment meted out towards them by the Brahmans and the Kayasthas. For a long time, the Namasudras had been the outcastes of society. Only when they were given a place of honour, would they come forward with full vigour to serve their country. Hence, if the nationalists really wanted the Namasudras to support their political movement, they should first wage a battle against social inequalities; but they were not prepared for such radical action, as their movement was devoid of any social content.³⁶ The peasants' class grievances against an oppressive gentry were thus very easily given a caste focus, as the Namasudra elites tried to construct a 'community' in opposition to the politics of the *bhadralok*.

The identification of the *swadeshi* movement with the high-caste Hindu *zamindars*, whom the Namasudra peasants thoroughly hated, was not quite unwarranted. Many of the leaders had *zamindari* estates in areas where Namasudras mainly served as tenants. Ambika Mazumdar, for example, had a *zamindari* in the swamp areas of Rajair in the Madaripur *thana* of Faridpur district,³⁷ while Aswini Datta's estate was

in Batajore in Bakarganj, where Namasudras mainly served as *barga* (sharecropping) tenants.³⁸ Apart from these top leaders, if we look at the composition of the National Volunteers during this time, we will find that almost all of them were either doctors or pleaders or else, sons of Hindu *zamindars* and their peons and *lathials*. In Namasudra majority areas, like Swarupkati, 'nearly half the volunteers are said to be talukdars'.³⁹ The Dacca Anusilan Samiti had a similar high-caste Hindu *bhadralok* orientation, although later on, a few low-caste persons were also taken in.⁴⁰ On the other hand, almost all the *Samitis* and associations run in areas like north and west Bakarganj, were patronised by the high-caste Hindu *bhadralok*, the majority of whom were either *zamindars*, *talukdars*, or *howladars*.⁴¹ In Bakarganj, it is often alleged that the leaders of the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, like Aswini Datta, Upendra Nath Sen and others were 'specially active in using their powers as landlord' to organise boycott and discontent.⁴² The Datta family of Batajore was known for frequent display of power and grandeur, and this heritage even Aswini Kumar could not always avoid. Despite his charisma and popularity, even among some of the Namasudra peasants, he was still the 'babu' whom no one dared to disobey.⁴³ To what extent was this the result of love or a manifestation of fear, it is difficult to determine. Similar allegations, as we have seen earlier, were common in other districts as well, particularly in Dacca, Faridpur and Mymensingh.

Thus, in the Namasudra peasant psyche, the anti-partition agitation easily came to be associated with the high-caste Hindu gentry with whom they had no identity of interest. The government, on the other hand, began to offer concessions in which the social aspirations of the upwardly mobile section of this caste found possibilities of fulfilment. The Resolution of the government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, in February 1907, announced that its employees would henceforth be recruited on the basis of the proportional numerical strength of the various communities, Muslims particularly, but the depressed Hindu castes not excluded. This raised new hopes in the minds of the educated Namasudras about further social and material advancement. Such admittance to the public service, as many of them sincerely believed, was 'their first chance of rising in public estimations'.⁴⁴

To take fullest advantage of such provisions, the educated Namasudras in 1907, under the advice of Rev. Mead, the Australian Baptist missionary stationed at Orakandi, decided to organise a delegation to Sir Lancelot Hare, the then Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Mead arranged the appointment and the delegation, headed by Guruchand himself, and included five of his close

associates, Bhishmadel Das, Sashi Bhushan Thakur, Dr Tarini Charan Bala, Radhamohan Biswas and Purna Chandra Mullick. From the October 1907 issue of their journal *Namasudra Sukrid*, we learn that the delegation had met the Lieutenant Governor and expressed their hopes that the British Government in India might remain for ever. They made him aware of the social injustices perpetrated on them, the development of education within their hitherto ignorant community and the necessity of appointing them in increasing numbers in public services in order to help them end the social stigma attached to their caste for centuries.⁴⁵ Interestingly, immediately after this meeting, Guruchand's son Sashi Bhushan was appointed a sub-Registrar, Dr Tarini Charan Bala, a government doctor and later in early 1908, Kumud Behari Mullick, a Deputy Magistrate.⁴⁶ All these appointments were regarded by the Namasudras, both the elites and the peasants alike, as symbols of recognition of their caste by the ruling authorities – a recognition totally absent in the pre-British days and which, they believed, would ensure them better treatment from local Hindu society as well.⁴⁷

In the field of education also, the Namasudras were being assisted by the government whenever approached. The Orakandi High School was established in 1908 and since then it had been maintained by subscriptions collected from the members of the Namasudra community. But Mead appealed to the Director of Public Instruction for funds and the application, being recommended by the Commissioner of Faridpur himself, resulted on the school immediately receiving a monthly grant of seventy-five rupees.⁴⁸ The establishment of this school really marked the beginning of greater diffusion of education among the ignorant Namasudra masses and the financial assistance it received made them more strongly attached to the missionaries and their patron, the British government. To counteract such moves, the nationalists could hardly offer any concrete programme for the upliftment of the social and economic status of the Namasudras.

The endeavours of the Namasudra leadership, supported adequately by the government, therefore, led to the expected political results. In Faridpur, the political speeches of Ambika Mazumdar advocating the use of *swadeshi* goods seem to have had little effect on the Namasudra peasantry⁴⁹ and the Dhalgram National School was soon 'reported to be defunct.'⁵⁰ In Bakarganj, the peasants in general, both low-caste Hindus and Muslims, had become indifferent and regarded the anti-government agitation merely as 'something that the Babus are doing.'⁵¹ In areas with major Namasudra concentration, like Pirojpur, Liverpool salt was being freely sold.⁵² Where they faced obstruction, such as in Goila in Gaurnadi

thana, the Namasudra peasants decided to set up a *hat* of their own, as they could not get British goods as freely as they wished.⁵³ Such anti-*swadeshi* sentiments had taken over their counterparts in the neighbouring districts of Jessore and Khulna as well. In April 1908, two meetings consisting of 700 to 800 Muslims and Namasudras were held in Jessore in order to counteract the efforts of the *swadeshis* and a notice was circulated threatening to burn the houses of those who would not use foreign articles.⁵⁴

In these areas, where the Namasudra peasantry had been sufficiently involved, the anti-*swadeshi* zeal had also taken the shape of a militant social protest, resulting in a good deal of communal tension. At a meeting of about 1,000 Namasudra peasants held at Narail, in Jessore, in September 1907, it was decided that they should not serve the higher classes of Hindus.⁵⁵ Once again in May 1908, in the neighbouring district of Khulna, the Namasudra and Muslim peasants combined against the higher caste Hindus in a dispute over the performance of a religious ceremony in village Tilak, about 5 or 6 miles south-east of Khulna. The quarrel arose between the Namasudras on one side and the Brahmans and Kayasthas on the other, over the right to perform Bhawani *pūja* (or *Kalipūja*) under a particular tree. The local Muslim residents used to assert rights over the land on which stood the *thakurbari* (temple) and every year claimed a share of the immense quantity of sugar and other offerings made to the goddess. This apportionment between the Hindus and the Muslims usually led to some bickerings. But in 1908, a special occasion for dispute arose, when the high-caste Hindus fixed the date of the *pūja* for the 10th of Jaishtha (Bengali year), and the Namasudras, incited by the Muslims, decided to perform it on the 6th, with their own Chandala Brahman who would enter the *mandap* or rostrum erected for this purpose. The Brahmans and the Kayasthas resented this and objected to the plan. This infuriated the Namasudras who combined together to carry through the plan and called the members of their caste, not only from their own district but from neighbouring Jessore and Faridpur as well. The high-caste Hindus, fearing a breach of peace, moved the district administration to issue an injunction prohibiting the *pūja*. But the attempt to enforce this injunction led to a violent clash.⁵⁶ The Muslims sided with the Namasudras and the combined mob, armed with spears, shields and *lathis*, assaulted the Sub-Inspector and the constables who had been deputed to maintain peace. The mob numbered from five to eight thousand, and they even defied the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police, and did not disperse until shots were fired on

them and the armed police appeared on the scene. About 120 men including Namasudras and Muslims were later convicted of rioting and punitive police were posted in the area for one year.⁵⁷ The incident shows that the antipathy of the Namasudra peasants towards the *swadeshi* movement was not the result of any sympathy for the British government. Their sense of community honour even impelled them to take up arms against the police and the district officials – the local agents of the Raj – who had in this case sided with their caste adversaries.

The nationalists seemed to have been aware of the developments and sufficiently conscious about the necessity of doing something to mobilise these people. The *swaraj* which the educated elites were talking about, asked in an article in *Navyabharat*, was it comprehensible to Dinu Mandal or Hamir Sheikh? If it was not, then it had no meaning and unless the confidence of these people could be gained the struggle for freedom was bound to fail.⁵⁸ A Namasudra, even when a graduate, could not sit beside a higher caste; was it any manifestation of peoples' love for the country, asked Sudarshan Biswas, a nationalist leader from east Bengal. Until this community was not properly respected, he thought, the *swadeshi* movement was not going to succeed.⁵⁹ The wisdom of the existing Congress policy that social reform could wait until political freedom was achieved, now came to be seriously questioned by men like Dhirendranath Chaudhuri.⁶⁰ To salvage the situation, therefore, the nationalists in 1908 made renewed attempts to mobilise the Namasudra community and the eighteenth resolution of the Bengal Provincial Conference held at Pabna in February, spoke of giving 'social privileges to the Namasudras, such as use of barbers, washermen and bearers'.⁶¹ In continuation of this initial gesture, two meetings were held in the district of Faridpur on 1 and 2 March. The first meeting was attended by three to four thousand people, including Muslims and Namasudras, as well as other Hindus. The first speaker in the meeting, G. G. Pattadar, a pleader from Rajbari, warned that the partition would be followed by the abolition of the Permanent Settlement and the people would have to pay heavier taxes. To prevent this was needed a united resistance by all the sections of Indian society. To achieve such social unity, he asked the Hindus present there to allow social privileges to the Namasudras who had been reluctant to join the agitation of their high-caste brethren out of a sense of social deprivation. Ambika Mazumdar, the next speaker, also explained to the Muslims and the Namasudras the advantages of using *swadeshi* goods and promised the latter that he would have their status raised if they gave up the use of foreign articles. In the second meeting as

well, he made similar appeals,⁶² which were 'reported, however, to have had little effect on the people more particularly addressed'.⁶³

Similarly in Bakarganj, the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti through its 159 village branches had been constantly trying to bring the Namasudra peasants into its organisation.⁶⁴ This particular problem received special attention during the deliberations of the Barisal District Conference held on 17, 18 and 19 August 1908. On the second day, Sricharan Sen moved the fifteenth resolution which ran as follows: 'This conference considers it necessary to spread education among the Namasudras whereby to improve their social condition.'⁶⁵

In moving the resolution, the speaker said that there would be no success in the political arena unless the condition of the Namasudras improved. The government dismissed their agitation as nothing more than the effort of a few educated men who wished to attain power in the political field. To avoid such stigma, as well as to make the movement more effective, the support of the lower classes had to be secured. For, it was quite impossible to agitate, as Sen argued, without the Namasudras who constituted the only fighting class of people among the Hindus of Bengal. There were twenty-three lakhs of them in the district of Bakarganj alone and the Christian missionaries were always after them. In order to neutralise such pernicious influences, the Namasudras had to be given some social privileges. They desired to have their clothes washed by the Hindu washermen and Sen could see no reason why they should be denied this privilege. For if the people could claim *swaraj* to have equal rights and privileges with the Englishmen, why then should the Namasudras not claim this concession? Hence to obtain *swaraj*, he urged the higher classes of people to make some concessions to the lower classes as well. The resolution was seconded by Purna Chandra De, who went so far as to compare the Samurai disturbances in Japan with those of the common classes in India, when he was stopped by the president, Aswini Kumar Datta. Baikuntha Nath Mal, one of the few educated Namasudras who attended the conference, also supported the resolution. He explained the present state of his community and said that the *dhobis* (washermen) had no reason to refuse their services to the Namasudras who also belonged very much to Hindu society. In addition to this he also pleaded for the assistance of the higher castes for the spread of education among the members of his caste. Two other Namasudras, Mohini Das of Chandshi and Aswini Kumar Halder of Garangal also supported the resolution which was carried without any opposition.⁶⁶

The third day of the meeting was entirely devoted to the question of 'improvement and reformation of society'. But as it appears from the

different speeches delivered on this day, of all social problems the one which monopolised the attention of almost all the speakers was that of the degraded condition of the Namasudras. Surendra Nath Sen of Gaurnadi expressed his views in favour of abolishing the caste system altogether. So long as this was not done, he argued, political success would continue to elude, for it needed brotherly feelings between all classes. Satish Chandra Chatterjee, one of the closest associates of Aswini Datta, spoke at length about the low social position of the Namasudras and frankly admitted that many of them were anti-*swadeshi* simply because they were despised by all sections of Hindu society. Hence in order to secure their political support they had to be given certain social privileges. Initially, as his simple solution was, the barbers had to be persuaded to shave the Namasudras. Sricharan Sen added to this a proposal of securing the services of the washermen as well. Some of the *zamindars* present in the meeting, like Upendra Nath Sen Mahalanabis of Basanda, Bhubanaswar Roy Chowdhury of Kalashkathi, and Sarada Kumar Roy Chowdhury of Rahamatpur, promised to see that the barbers and washermen serve the Namasudras in their respective *zamindaris*.⁶⁷

It is important to note here, that the list of people who attended the Barisal District Conference on 17–19 August 1908, shows that an overwhelming majority of them belonged to the three Hindu upper castes;⁶⁸ but none of them uttered a single word about accepting food and water from the hands of the Namasudras – a social demand raised by the latter since the early 1870s. Instead, they satisfied their conscience by shifting the responsibility on to the shoulders of the barbers and washermen. Apart from a few hollow promises, neither in the speeches of Ambika Mazumdar nor in those delivered at the Barisal District Conference, was there any concrete programme for the social and economic advancement of the Namasudra peasants. Such a lack of serious intention was clearly discernible also in a speech delivered at a Namasudra conference in the middle of 1908 by Pyary Sankar Dasgupta, an extremist leader from Bogra. He advised the Namasudras not to quarrel with the higher castes, for such feeling of animosity would make it more difficult for them to attain a higher social status. They should eschew their sectarianism and unite with the rest of the society under the banner of the Indian nation. But what would they receive in return and how would they improve their material condition and social position? His answer to this difficult question was simple: 'Help yourself and God will help you'!⁶⁹

II

In fact the Namasudras were helping themselves in the way they considered best suited to their interests. A Namasudra Conference in March 1908, demanded 'freedom of trade' and by the summer of that year they were reported to be openly buying foreign cloth and salt in Barisal, in spite of the fact that sometimes these were even costlier than their *swadeshi* substitutes.⁷⁰ Such active resistance to the *swadeshi* movement was perhaps to some extent also due to the commutation proceedings under Section 40 of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which further exacerbated the tensions between the high-caste Hindu landlords and their Namasudra tenants.

Produce rent was an exceptional feature of the land-tenure system of Bakarganj. Apart from a few isolated areas in *thana* Mehendiganj and round Banaripara, it could only be found extensively in the marshy regions of Gaurnadi police station where large colonies of high-caste Hindu *bhadralok* had settled and the Namasudra agriculturists served as tenants. It was undoubtedly the most miserable part of Bakarganj, supplying the bulk of the day-labourers of the district, while in the harvesting seasons the farm-hands of the richer southern *thanas* were entirely recruited here.⁷¹ But even in these areas, produce rent seems to have been a rather modern development and in all probability was the result of the increase in the price of rice since 1870. Some of the petty landlords found it difficult to feed their families and turned to their tenants for the supply of rice, while some of them not satisfied with supplying their own wants, set up a highly profitable trade in rice. Where vacant land was available it was leased at a produce rent. But in many cases existing low cash rents were converted arbitrarily into produce rents, particularly when the tenants were found in arrears or owed money to their landlords.⁷² Due to the unpredictability of nature, tenants were often caught in such a vulnerable position. In Gaurnadi *thana*, once or twice in a decade there a dreadful year would occur in which the floods would wipe out all the crops and render the Namasudra tenants almost penniless.⁷³ The landlords would only have to wait for one such year to compel them to accept *barga* tenancy. Under this system, the landlord's share was usually fixed at a half, but sometimes at a third of the total crop, and it was collected from the threshing floor itself. Soon the landlords found fault with this system, because of the difficulties in measuring the crop and the fluctuations in the amount with the varying seasons. They devised a new system, the *dhankarari*, 'in which the rent was fixed at a definite amount of produce (so many maunds of paddy)

and by which measurement and fluctuations were equally avoided'.⁷⁴ Ordinarily under this system none of the expenses of cultivation were borne by the landlord, so that both the burden and the hazard of cultivation were taken by the tenant himself.⁷⁵ The *karari* rent usually represented little less than one half of the average crop and sometimes considerably more, leaving the tenant with the surplus paddy of the fat years, when it sold at low prices, and taking from him almost everything in the lean years, when prices were prohibitive. In these areas the average cash rates were low, varying between three and four rupees an acre, while on the other hand, the valuation of *karari* rents would ordinarily be between twelve and sixteen rupees per acre, occasionally even higher. Naturally, therefore, during the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, a considerable amount of land previously held at cash rates were speedily converted, on one pretext or another and by one means or another, into lands of produce-paying tenancies. Where the *barga* system initially came into existence, it was soon converted into *karari* tenancy.⁷⁶

The *barga* system, it is true, was liable to abuse and was often used as an instrument of oppression. However, the cultivators, it seems, had accepted it without much hesitation, as after the cyclone of 1876 money had become scarce and dear and communications with the grain-markets insecure.⁷⁷ But the *dhankarari* tenancies to them were simply detestable. Therefore, when the settlement operations started in Bakarganj, a large number of Namasudra tenants, led sometimes by the Christian converts, organised themselves in Gaurnadi and made verbal applications for commutation of their produce rents into cash rents. By section 40 of the Tenancy Act of 1885, commutation could be made on the application of an occupancy *raiyat* by an officer making a settlement of rent under Chapter X. The landlords objected strongly to any such commutation and when the Settlement Officer, Mr Beatson-Bell, in a tour of inspection made it clear to them that commutation was a legal right of an occupancy *raiyat*, some of the Guarnadi landlords began to sue their tenants, whose rents had been commuted, for three years' arrears of produce rents. This particular course was adopted by them merely to frighten the tenants, who had not as yet applied, from making any application, and to compel those whose rents had been commuted to continue paying in kind as before.⁷⁸ Prior to 1904, there had never been a single suit for arrears of produce rents in the civil courts. In 1904 came the settlement operations with commutation, bitterly resented by the landlords, and in 1905 there were two hundred and nine suits for arrears of paddy rents accruing in 1901-02 and 1903. Out of these two hundred

and nine cases, many contested, the landlords got decrees in two hundred and six and this led them to boast openly in Gaurnadi that they would bring their tenants to their knees by rent suits.⁷⁹

But history was destined to be different. When the settlement of the district reached what was technically known as the 'attestation' stage, the practice of commuting produce to money rents was introduced. Subsequently, however, it was held to be illegal, as section 40 of the Bengal Tenancy Act in the form in which it then stood, gave no authority to the Settlement Officers or their assistants to commute rents at the attestation stage. To rectify this illegality, one of the Assistant Settlement Officers, Radha Krishna Goswami, was 'specially empowered' by the local government to deal with the applications for commutation and to proceed with them *de novo*. Nearly all these applications were granted and the money rent fixed was much below the value of the produce which hitherto fell to the landlord's share.⁸⁰ This light money rent fixed by the new officer encouraged the other Namasudra cultivators of the marshy areas to form a combination and apply for further commutation. In order to induce others to join them, they circulated the story that it was in fact the government which was pressing for such commutation and in some cases they went so far as to coerce, by social boycott, those who hesitated to apply. The result was the opening of the flood-gates: Goswami started his work in April 1908 and the number of applications received up to August was 1,305. Of them 1,160 were disposed of and in all cases except about thirty, commutation was allowed.⁸¹

The implications of such a development were not happy ones for the landlords. It meant a sudden reduction of the rent roll and the landlords did not accept it in good grace. As a first step, they filed a large number of appeals and, in those cases in which the time for appeal had expired, petitions for revision.⁸² They also sent memorials to the Board of Revenue saying that 'these proceedings . . . [were] conducted to the special advantage of the tenants' and describing the findings of the Assistant Settlement Officer as 'in almost all cases most arbitrary'.⁸³ But as a last resort, as H. Savage, the first member of the Board of Revenue noted in August 1908, 'the landlords intend[ed] either to harass their tenants by suits for the produce rents now in arrears and so bring them to their knees, or failing this to resort to the lathi, dao and similar weapons in the use of which the inhabitants of Bakarganj . . . [were] past masters'.⁸⁴ But even then the tenants refused to be intimidated. When in early 1910, Atul Chandra Guha, the Deputy Collector, was asked to enquire and report on the disputed cases, in only seven out of a total of one hundred and eighty-seven cases did the tenants fail to appear at the time of the enquiry.⁸⁵

Thus the commutation proceedings brought to the surface the long accumulated hatred between the high-caste Hindu landlords and their suffering Namasudra tenants, the government projecting itself as the benefactor of the latter. Many of the landlords involved in such proceedings were men of very good circumstances, having a large trade in rice and sometimes closely associated with the *swadeshi* movement. Most notable among them were the Dattas of Batajore (the family to which belonged Aswini Kumar Datta), the Dasses of Goila, the Sarbajnas of Bakal and the Guptas of Chandshi.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the commutation proceedings affected only about 7 per cent of the total area paying rent in kind in the whole district and the cases were only numerous in the marshy regions of Gaurnadi and Mehendiganj *thanas* where mostly Namasudras served as tenants at produce rent.⁸⁷ The fact indicates the effectiveness of the Namasudra caste loyalty for organising peasant resistance against a long-perpetrated oppressive device of the all-powerful high-caste Hindu landlords. The government also efficiently played the role of a dependable patron of the tenants and thus successfully fanned the hatred existing between the two classes. This attitude of the government is amply revealed in the following extract from a letter of J. C. Jack, the Settlement Officer, written to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division, when the commutation proceedings were proposed to be discontinued:

I might also add that the bil tenants [Namasudras] have been a thing apart for years. They were originally driven to the bils [marshes] by the oppression of the higher castes; and previous to permanent settlement these colonies owned nobody as landlords. It was we who handed them over for nothing by the permanent settlement to these very higher castes from whose oppression they had sought shelter in the bils. These same higher castes had reaped always where the Namas only sowed. Now it is proposed apparently to throw them once again to feed the rapacity of the wolves.⁸⁸

It is, therefore, no wonder that in 1908, the Namasudra peasants in Bakarganj had become the strongest supporters of the British Raj and offered an active resistance to the *swadeshi* movement, which in their consciousness had come to be associated with the high-caste Hindu gentry, their hated oppressors. Such agrarian tension was not a local phenomenon of Bakarganj alone. In the *bil* areas of Faridpur cash rents at the prevailing rate were being converted wholesale into *barga* with a rent of half the crop.⁸⁹ Of course, it is true, that in the marshes, where the

amount of land capable of cultivation varied each year, the *barga* system had its advantages and probably suited the tenants as well.⁹⁰ But in Kotalipara and Gopalganj, where the Namasudras mainly resided, *dhankarari* tenures were rapidly proliferating and under this system, the tenants had to pay a much higher rent than the prevailing low cash rates.⁹¹ Petty frictions were, therefore, not infrequent, as the cultivators often attempted, although unsuccessfully, to get a cash rent substituted for a produce rent.⁹² Disturbance between the Namasudras and their landlords were also regular occurrences. In January 1909, a case of looting in a bazaar was reported from Gopinathpur in the Madaripur subdivision;⁹³ and it was only one reported incident, probably among many others, that were caused by the 'considerable trouble . . . between the Namasudras and their landlords' prevailing at that time throughout the entire subdivision.⁹⁴ The special officer who was deputed to make local enquiry, found it to be simply an attempt of the Namasudras to entangle their landlords into some trouble and thereby to bring their own grievances to the notice of the government authorities.⁹⁵ This excitement persisted until the end of the year and spread to the neighbouring regions as well. In late September, a case of house-breaking was reported from the village of Ghratakandi in Muksudpur *thana* of Sadar subdivision.⁹⁶ When the police arrived and conducted searches in connection with the burglary, they were violently assaulted by the local Namasudras. The sub-inspector had to open fire in self-defence when one of his boatmen was seriously injured and a constable was struck down with a *dao*.⁹⁷ Such turbulence and lawlessness, as it was reported, were almost general features of the Namasudras of Muksudpur during this time.⁹⁸ The situation places the political attitudes of the Namasudra peasants in proper perspective. They sided with the government when its policies served their class interests; but they had little hesitation in taking up arms against the same government when in the name of maintaining law and order it sided with their social and economic adversaries.

This atmosphere of tension and violence further widened the gulf between the Namasudra peasantry and their high-caste landlords in Faridpur district and stiffened the hostile attitude of the former towards the *swadeshi* movement. The Namasudra leadership also contributed to this estrangement by preaching a kind of counter-casteism. The paper *Namasudra Suhrid* pointed out at this juncture that the high-caste Hindus had always considered them as untouchables and were opposed to their progress and social advancement. How could these people project themselves as friends of the country and the leaders of the *swadeshi* movement? Right, therefore, were those Namasudras of Jessore

and Faridpur who had decided not to accept water touched by the Brahmans and other higher castes.⁹⁹ In April 1909, the Namasudras of Faridpur held a meeting at Machkhali at which they resolved to boycott the higher classes who denied them social privileges.¹⁰⁰ Before that, on 27 February an important meeting of the Muslims and the Namasudras had already taken place in the village of Maldia. Its objective was to form a combination against the boycott movement. The meeting expressed its sympathy with the Namasudras of the locality, who were said to have been 'inhumanly oppressed by the Swadeshi volunteers'.¹⁰¹ This political alliance took place despite the existence of communal tension between the two groups, particularly in the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district and across the river Madhumati in the adjoining areas of Narail subdivision of Jessore and the actual occurrence of a riot at Tilchhara near Kasiani police station in the former subdivision around 1908-09.¹⁰²

The agitation of the Namasudras for their social and educational advancement and the general tension prevailing in the area made the higher caste Bengalees panicky. 'The Namasudras of Faridpur and Barisal have virtually declared a boycott against the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidyas', noted one of them with alarm. There were possibilities of their being united with all other lower classes and if this happened, he feared, the happiness and honour of the higher castes would all be washed away.¹⁰³ The nationalist leaders should take lessons from history, cautioned another. When the lower classes are awakened, no force on earth could prevent them from winning their rights. If the lower castes in India were not given their rightful place in society, their movement would result in a revolution far more serious than the French Revolution itself!¹⁰⁴ A fresh series of political meetings by the nationalists followed swiftly.

In Bakarganj one such meeting was held in October 1909, under the presidency of Rajani Kanta Das, a pleader of Barisal. Here Upendranath Sen, a well-known local leader, promised a free site for a boarding house for the Namasudra students, and two others promised to canvass for subscriptions throughout the villages.¹⁰⁵ During the latter part of the month, Ambika Mazumdar made a tour in eastern Faridpur with a view to engaging the sympathy of the Namasudras to the boycott movement in return for a promise of acceptance as members of Hindu society. Exaggerated accounts of the success of this tour appeared in the Calcutta newspapers; but the reports of the local government officers indicate that 'the number of Namasudras who attended the meeting, or took the "swadeshi vow" was in reality small'.¹⁰⁶

The government, however, took serious notice of this new

development, because it showed that 'the importance of the so-called "depressed classes" and the fact that they have hitherto been unaffected by the agitation . . . [were now being] recognized and appreciated by its leaders.'¹⁰⁷ This realisation had prompted the leaders to invite Namasudras and other persons of low caste to *swadeshi* meetings where complimentary things were said about them and they were promised social privileges if they agreed to take the *swadeshi* vow. The government regarded this movement 'as extremely dangerous since it appeals powerfully to the most ignorant sections of the people'.¹⁰⁸

There was, however, very little chance of these people being won over by the nationalists, for the promises they made were not always adequately backed up by action. The higher castes were too afraid of the consequences of granting the Namasudras the privileges they asked for.¹⁰⁹ In early November, Ambika Mazumdar went to Kotalipara *thana* in the Madaripur sub-division and held meetings at Paschimpur and Pinjuri villages. A considerable number of the local Namasudras appeared to have attended the meetings and showed interest in the promises put forward by the speaker, on behalf of his brother Bengalees, that the higher castes would help them in bettering their social position, if they, in their turn, would assist the higher castes in the *swadeshi* and boycott movement.¹¹⁰ But the initial signs of enthusiasm rapidly disappeared when the Namasudras found, soon after the meetings, that the reality of social relations had hardly changed. As the Sub-Divisional Officer of Gopalganj reported, even the liberal-minded high-caste *bhadralok* were afraid to grant any privilege whatsoever, for fear of offending the more orthodox sections and thereby creating internal social dissension. So within a month the issue ceased to be actively discussed in the locality and appears to have been dropped altogether.¹¹¹

In the meantime, tension was mounting in other neighbouring districts as well. In 1909, the Namasudra and Muslim peasants of the Narail subdivision of Jessore made common cause to protest against the low opinion in which they were held by the higher caste Hindus. With this objective they combined for some months and decided not to work as menial servants in the houses of the latter, or eat food cooked by them. In some parts of the Magura subdivision also, the Namasudras refused to serve in the houses of the higher caste Hindus or cultivate their lands.¹¹² In Mymensingh, around September the same year, the Namasudras of Katiadi, who used to serve as *palki* (palanquin) bearers, refused to continue their work and in consequence were threatened by the leading Hindus of the locality.¹¹³ In January the next year, they held meetings in different parts of the Tangail subdivision, at which they

resolved not to serve the Kayasthas in any way, and the latter in return decided not to let land nor lend money to the Namasudras.¹¹⁴ As available evidence suggests, such tension between the two communities continued at least up to the beginning of 1911.¹¹⁵

The growing dissatisfaction among the lower caste people in different parts of eastern Bengal prompted the nationalist leaders to organise in March 1910, three conferences at Patuakhali, Pangsang and Tangail in the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh respectively. The meetings were planned partially with the purpose of improving the status of the 'depressed classes', but the government suspected political motives of fostering boycott agitation among these lower classes who had so long remained aloof from it. On no ground was it prepared to allow this, and all the three conferences were therefore prohibited under the Seditious Meetings Act. The order of prohibition, however, brought 'a sense of relief' to many people in all the three districts;¹¹⁶ perhaps, they were not fully convinced about the desirability of granting any concession to the 'depressed classes' which might disturb the existing social equilibrium. The government, it therefore seems, had in fact overreacted, as there was very little reason to be so apprehensive about the possible results of the meetings.

III

With the onset of the census operations, the Namasudra movement and the nationalist response to it began to take a new turn. Since the meeting with the Lieutenant Governor in 1907, a campaign had been launched by the Namasudra leaders for securing social acceptance of their new, more pleasing, caste name in place of Chandala, the old despised one. The campaign was locally organised by Shyamlal Biswas of Jessore, Ramkinkar Ray, Dr Dinabandhu Badoi, Dr Kalicharan Mandal of Dacca, Bhishmadel Das, Purna Chandra Mullick and Dr Tarini Charan Bala of Faridpur, under the overall leadership of Guruchand Thakur.¹¹⁷ When society refused to respond favourably, they turned to the Census Commissioner. They were entered in the census tables of 1891 as 'Namasudra or Chandala', and in those of 1901 as 'Namasudra (Chandala)'. But now on the eve of the Census of 1911, Dr Mead suggested to Guruchand that scores of applications should be sent to the census authorities for the rectification of the returns. Messages were therefore sent from Orakandi to different centres from where local leaders forwarded their separate applications to the Census Commis-

sioner, E. A. Gait, then stationed at Punjab, to the effect that they should be returned in the Census reports not as 'Chandal', but as 'Namasudra'. The application which was sent from Orakandi was recommended by Mead himself.¹¹⁸ The local government officials also seem to have supported them on this particular issue.¹¹⁹ The result was that, in the report of 1911, they were entered as just 'Namasudra'; the hated appellation 'Chandal' was completely omitted.

The census agitation in 1911 involved hostilities between the higher and the lower castes, with the high-caste enumerators, often purposefully entering people as of lower rank, further embittering the relationship. 'I am afraid that many a bitter tear was shed in February and March this year', noted a contemporary colonial observer, 'over caste entries' in the census.¹²⁰ But what concerned the nationalist leadership was not this social tension, but the political implications of such a movement. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, by conceding the demand of the Muslim leaders for separate representation, had stimulated similar aspirations for separate electorates in the minds of the leaders of many other social groups; the Namasudras were among them. And the apprehension does not seem to be without adequate ground in view of the following petition which the government received from the Namasudra leaders at about this time:

We beg to add that, though our religious rites and their observances and social customs are similar to those of high-caste Brahmins, *we have not the slightest connection with any of the Hindu communities.* We are not allowed to join them in their social and religious ceremonies. They have been continually looking down upon us with contempt and malice; have kept us under subjection and total ignorance. We have been smarting under their yoke of bondage. It is absolutely absurd to anticipate that they would, in future, mix with us in social and religious performances. *Thus we desire to be recognised by the Government as entirely a different community having separate claim to political privileges like Muhammadans.*¹²¹

Such rhetorics of separatism were probably also due to the notorious circular of E. A. Gait, the Census Commissioner, stating that the 'depressed classes' would be enumerated separately in the coming census. It at once became the target of attack by the nationalists who saw in it other political motives as well. There was a general impression prevalent among the Hindu politicians and the press that the 'Hindus as a class were not receiving at the hands of the Government the amount of justice and fair play which their numbers, education and importance

deserve[d]'. There were even proposals for the establishment of an all-India Hindu League for the protection of Hindu interests. The Namasudra movement in this context became vitally important to them as they desired 'to use Namasudra agency to turn the balance against Muhammadans in East Bengal in cases of necessity'.¹²² In Gait's Circular the nationalists therefore saw a clear political motive for reducing the numerical superiority of the Hindus by excluding certain untouchable castes from Hindu society. The circular was strongly criticised by the Hindu press and the interference of both the retiring and the incoming Viceroy was sought to secure its withdrawal.¹²³

Simultaneously with such attacks on the controversial circular, the nationalists also attempted to spread their influence among these untouchable castes and tried to eliminate their suspicions and thoughts of political separatism. The nationalist press expressed a good deal of sympathy for them in view of the many social disabilities under which they laboured and the agitations started by the Namasudras, the Bhui Malis and others for the removal of these disabilities received considerable support. An article in *The Dacca Review* 'hail[ed] the movement' among the lower castes, for it was 'one of awakened self-respect amongst the classes who . . . [were] more or less kept under by society'. Such a movement, it was hoped, would have 'an abiding influence in elevating the nation by elevating its depressed millions'.¹²⁴ The extremist paper *Praja Sakti* declared: 'We are on the eve of a social revolution . . . Talk of caste distinctions when India is a free country, and not now. Irresistible as the ocean tide the Sudras come on. They appeal to the greatest force of our times . . . the conscience of the civilised man.' The *Barisal Hitaishi*, another extremist paper, observed: 'All those who have eyes to see must have noticed how a grave wave of dissolution has touched the conservative Hindu Society, . . . willy-nilly, consciously or unconsciously, all people are being drawn into the vortex of this agitation, . . . God alone is to be the leader of this impending social revolution.' The *Charu Mihir* advocated social reform from a belief that unless some reforms were effected in Hindu society, the Hindus could not hope to secure political rights, and would deprive their society of the means of their own conservation. 'Government officials do not attach much importance to their agitation,' it remarked, 'because of their indifference to the distress that prevails among the depressed classes.'¹²⁵ To win over the political support of these depressed sections of the society, the nationalists, along with such press propaganda, also organised meetings at different places. One such meeting took place on 13 December 1910 among the Namasudras in Nadia. It was held in the

house of Sashi Bhusan Thakur (not the son of Guruchand), at village Kamalapur in Kumarkhali *thana*. Five or six hundred people assembled and resolutions were passed that the inferior caste of Namasudras should also enjoy the same privileges as other sections of Hindu society. The meeting was presided over by Sarada Charan Mitra, an ex-Judge of the High Court, who was at that time organising a pan-Hindu movement in order to counteract the activities of the Muslim League.¹²⁶

Early next year, Gait's circular was withdrawn through a press communiqué which stated that there would be no departure from the established practice regarding the enumeration of castes.¹²⁷ For the nationalists the immediate cause of anxiety was removed, but a concern for the future remained. Fortunately, however, soon they found an opportunity which they tried to utilise in all earnestness, to win over the Namasudras, who had been the most articulate group among the 'depressed classes' in pressing their community centric political demands. It was at this particular juncture that the working alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras nearly broke down due to the outbreak of a series of riots between the two communities at different places in eastern Bengal. And the nationalists, by supporting the cause of the Namasudras, tried to earn their sympathy.

In June 1911 at Jaynagar *hat* in Faridpur district, an altercation over the damage done by some cows trespassing in a field was about to cause a serious riot between the Muslims and the Namasudras, as the two parties assembled to the number of 400 on each side and prepared to attack each other. Bloodshed was, however, avoided as wiser counsel prevailed among them when a police party arrived.¹²⁸ During the same month, the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet reported a riot between the two communities at Chaudhuri Bazar. A Muslim mob, numbering over a thousand and armed with spears and lathis, attacked the Namasudras and damaged their houses. According to the Deputy Commissioner, it was one of the offshoots of the movement among the Namasudras to improve their social status by refusing to serve as boatmen or *palki* bearers. This irritated their former Muslim employers and the dispute about the impounding of a Namasudra's cow trespassing in the field of a Muslim led first to the Muslims being beaten up by the Namasudras, and then, a few days later, to this fierce riot. The names of thirty-nine Muslims involved in the disturbances were obtained and eleven of them were arrested and sent for trial.¹²⁹

The worst of these riots, however, took place in May 1911, in the border areas of the districts of Jessore and Khulna. This region was notorious for land disputes and 'paddy cutting cases' leading to violent

riots,¹³⁰ and the immediate occasion of the May 1911 one was also a dispute over the possession of a piece of land. There was a long background of complicated antecedents, leading to mounting excitement, bursting forth into a fierce riot over a petty land dispute between two individuals belonging to the two communities. In fact, the first half of the year 1911 witnessed a series of riots in contiguous regions around the Jessore-Khulna border where the Muslims and the Namasudras lived side by side. The first of these riots took place in the village of Nalichar (or Nalerchak) in Khulna in January 1911, when a Muslim had seized some cattle belonging to a Namasudra, for damaging his crops. Although the cattle were rescued, this was considered by the Namasudras as an insult and to avenge it, about four to five hundred Namasudras attacked this Muslim village. In panic, the Muslims set fire to a small hut, thinking that the fear of being accused of arson would desist the Namasudras. But the latter saw through the device, set fire to other houses and freely looted them. Definite complaints were received against forty-five Namasudras, of whom twelve were committed to the sessions. The next incident occurred in the village of Harihargope in Mollahat police station of Khulna. Here in March 1911, a Namasudra seized some cattle which were damaging his crops. As these cattle belonged to a Muslim, some fifty or sixty of them attacked the Namasudras, pulled down a house and stabbed one to death. The next case was reported in April 1911, from Gadaipur, a village in Paikgacha police station in Khulna, where the court litigation between a Muslim *quazi* and a Namasudra led to sustained tension threatening a riot, which was, however, averted by the timely intervention of the police. Another minor case of rioting was also reported from Magura police station around this time.¹³¹ But none of these seem to have any far-reaching impact except the Nalichar case.

In this case, the twelve accused Namasudras were defended by 'a barrister from Calcutta', and the contradictions in the evidence of the prosecution witnesses were made to create an impression that the Muslims themselves had set fire to all their houses. The Namasudras, as a result, were all acquitted by the unanimous decision of a jury which included two Muslims. The judgement was announced on 13 May 1911 and the news spread rapidly over the Muslim villages in the area. The feeling of resentment and desire for revenge deepened, but no immediate action was taken by the Muslims until the matter was brought again to a head by the Namasudras themselves in a village called Barnal (also called Chandinagar) in Kalia police station in Jessore, about eight or nine miles away from Nalichar.¹³²

A Namasudra of Barnal, Kutiswar Mandal, had been in possession of a considerable piece of land, about 170 *bighas* in that village, rented from the Hatberia Kayastha *zamindar*. In Bhadra 1314 B.S. (August–September 1907) the land was sold in auction for arrears of rent and was settled in 1908 with some Muslims of the same village, Abdur Sardar and Krishna Mandal Tikadar. Kutiswar went to court to have the sale set aside, but in April or May 1910 Abdur was finally given possession of the land. Nothing in fact happened further until the time for cutting *boro* paddy (winter crop) in May 1911. It appears that the wholesale acquittal of the Namasudras in Nalichar riot case on 13 May had given rise to a spirit of jubilation among the Namasudras in Khulna and Jessore villages. On 16 May Kutiswar, with the help of a number of Namasudras, cut the paddy of one portion of the disputed land. On 18 May, Abdur, in his turn, collected some Muslims, recovered the paddy from Kutiswar's possession and looted his house. This enraged the Namasudras who began to collect a force from Sachidah, Kamarul and Patla, the three Namasudra villages near Nalichar, while Abdur also sent words to the Muslims in the neighbouring villages to join him. That afternoon the Muslims looted about seventeen Namasudra houses in Chandinagar, and the following morning, the Namasudras had their revenge by looting thirty-four Muslim houses including Abdur Sardar's in Chandinagar and twenty-four houses in the neighbouring villages of Bildhuria, Pilpanagar and Kunjapur in Jessore.¹³³

Rumours about these Namasudra rampages spread like wild-fire through the Muslim villages, as Muslim messengers on horseback were sent to the north and the east for spreading the alarm that 'the Namasudras were coming'. A local influential Muslim, Dudu Mia, the Panchayat President of Kalabaria, also lent his support in mobilising the Muslims, who gathered with surprising rapidity not only from the neighbouring villages of Jessore and Khulna, but also from two or three villages across the river Madhumati in the Faridpur district. By the afternoon of 19 May, the Muslims had gathered in overwhelming numbers, estimated from 2,000 to 5,000, and from this time onward they had it all their own way. From about 2pm they started looting Namasudra houses – seventeen in Porekhali, nineteen in Khamar and seven in Ghanashyampur. The attack was specially furious at Khamar where some resistance was offered by Nabakrishna Biswas, the headman and the most wealthy of the Namasudras in the region. The looting spree continued into the next day and the Namasudras in panic started leaving their villages with their women, children and valuables.¹³⁴

The rioting mob was, however, continuously chased by the Sub-

Inspector of Kalia and the Deputy Collector, Sukesh Chandra Deb Roy. The appearance of the latter on horseback and in a *shola* hat (known to be a prerogative of the *sahibs*) gave rise to the impression that the Superintendent of Police had arrived and it is probable that this prevented the Muslims from advancing further north to Kalia. Meanwhile, the Magistrate of Jessore and the two Superintendents of Police of Khulna and Jessore arrived with the armed police. This put a stop to rioting in the afternoon of 20 May. The disturbances thus lasted for three days and thirteen villages in Jessore and five in Khulna were attacked. There were two confirmed and three unconfirmed deaths; six Namasudras and seven Muslims were injured more or less seriously. The loss of property in terms of its money-value was not that significant, as the Namasudra villagers did not have much valuable property to be looted. In Jessore, it was estimated to be Rs. 38,698 and in Khulna Rs. 1,965. The loss was greatest in Khamar; elsewhere the rioters merely took away brass utensils, door-frames, clothes, etc., some of which were later recovered from tanks, boats and jute fields.¹³⁵ In most cases, the damage was confined to the destruction of huts and to the breaking of inexpensive household utensils. There were a few cases of arson and only in one instance a Namasudra girl was carried off and raped by a Muslim.¹³⁶

The situation, however, remained tense for a few more days and as a precautionary measure, the government mobilised a contingent of military police.¹³⁷ The military authorities at Fort William were also alerted. But this additional force was not required as no further untoward incident occurred.¹³⁸ But in view of the fact that the rioters, both Muslims and Namasudras, were armed with guns and they did not initially give way to the police, a punitive police force was posted in the disturbed areas for a period of one year.¹³⁹ Chandra Sekhar Kar, Deputy Magistrate of Nadia, was appointed a Special Magistrate who would 'give his undivided attention to the cases' related to this riot.¹⁴⁰ Later, B. N. Mukherjee replaced him in this position and as a result of their exertions, by December 1911, seventeen cases (out of twenty) were disposed off, in which two hundred and one persons were convicted, twenty-two persons were acquitted and fifteen were discharged, out of two hundred and seventy sent for trial.¹⁴¹

The location of the riot of May 1911 provided it with some special features. The area which had been directly affected by this riot comprised the southern part of Kalia police station in Jessore and the adjoining northern part of Sadar police station in Khulna district. But the rioters assembled from a far wider region of about one hundred square miles in Jessore and 5 square miles in Khulna district.¹⁴² There was a

number of purely Namasudra villages both to the extreme east and to the extreme west of this region. Between these two Namasudra centres and to the north and south, there were a large number of villages inhabited by a mixed population of Namasudras and Muslims. Being conscious of their superior number in their own localities, the Namasudras took the offensive and made a petty personal quarrel a communal issue.¹⁴³ But in the region as a whole, particularly in Kalia police station, the Muslims outnumbered them by about 50 per cent.¹⁴⁴ Hence the situation soon got out of their hands and they found themselves on the defensive.

But more significantly, there were some other villages in the region, inhabited by the other castes of the Hindu community and these neither participated in nor were affected by the disturbances. This particular feature distinguished this riot of May 1911 from the ordinary genre of Hindu-Muslim riots and gave it the character of a Namasudra-Muslim riot *per se*. The members of various other Hindu castes, living in the area, being concerned about the safety of their houses, consulted the local Muslims and were instructed by the latter to put up flags to distinguish their houses. They had no fear from the local Muslims who knew their houses. But as Muslims from distant areas formed the majority of the mob, the houses of other Hindu castes besides Namasudras ran a risk of being looted unless distinguished. Different castes therefore adopted more or less distinctive flags or articles which came handy to them. The Jalias or fishermen tied up pieces of nets on sticks in front of their houses. The Kapalis or gunnybag-makers hung pieces of jute. The Kayasthas and Kaibartas hoisted white rags, the Baisnabs saffron flags which they used in worship and the Muchis (cobblers) put up pieces of skin.¹⁴⁵ All these distinctive flags were erected by the non-Namasudra Hindus either on 19 or 20 May, as news spread of the advance of the Muslims. None of these houses, except only one of a Brahman, was attacked by rioters and that too was by mistake.¹⁴⁶

The whole development, therefore, speaks of a premeditated plan. The sudden mobilisation of a Muslim mob of about four thousand strong, marching 'in a regular file of four in each row',¹⁴⁷ is also difficult to explain otherwise. Indeed, after the Nalichar occurrence, the Muslims held meetings in Kalabaria and Bowishana (Kalia police station) in Jessore and in Atlia in Khulna police station. In these meetings the Nalichar outrage was described as a gross insult to their community and decision was taken to form village committees, so that they could have well-orchestrated action at the next probable contingency. All others, except the Muslims, were rigidly excluded from these meetings and hence, local inhabitants remained absolutely ignorant of this organisa-

tion. Some leading Muslims of the area, like Dudu Mia, the Panchayat President of Kalabaria and Hatem Moulavi, the Panchayat President of Atlia, were actively involved in such organisational drives. When the police received information about these meetings and enquired about them, they were assured by Dudu Mia that the meetings were merely for the discussion of religious and educational matters. No further precaution was, therefore, taken against any possible disturbance.¹⁴⁸

Jitendranath Ray, the Hatberia *zamindar*, and his men also failed to take prompt action to control the Muslim rioters who had assembled in their villages. It might have been possible, as some of the local people suspected, that they were themselves interested in such a riot to put a stop to the refractory nature of their Namasudra *raiyats* who fought with them so long over the possession of the disputed *ganthi*.¹⁴⁹ There were also rumours that the *naib* of the Hatberia *zamindar*, Kalibar Ghose, had himself brought the Muslims to punish Kutiswar Mandal. For, while there was still a case pending between the latter and the Hatberia *zamindar* to set aside the sale of the land in dispute, the *naib* had settled the issue with Abdur Sardar, 'a leading Muhammadan' who had 'a very bad reputation' in the neighbourhood.¹⁵⁰ Under the circumstances, it may seem quite possible that the riot was merely meant to resolve this purely local dispute, but eventually got out of control. It should be borne in mind, however, that this case alone hardly explains the rapid mobilisation of so many Muslims coming from such a wide area. Furthermore, the later enquiries revealed, that the *zamindar* and his men had no inkling that such an occurrence was imminent. They gave information to the police as soon as they had come to know of the riots, although this was after the police had been informed.¹⁵¹ No one, in fact, had any prior information.¹⁵²

The situation, therefore, brings us to the question of consciousness. 'The hatred', as the District Magistrate of Jessore rightly diagnosed, was 'due to feeling rather than material matters'. In this part of the country, cultivation was almost entirely in the hands of the Muslims and Namasudras, to the exclusion of other castes. The rise in prices and comparatively low rents made them relatively prosperous and thereby emboldened with a spirit of independence and self-respect.¹⁵³ The waves of the new social movement started at Orakandi in Faridpur had reached the Jessore-Khulna villages much earlier to encourage the local Namasudras to claim a higher social status. Although, newspapers generally did not find their way into this affected area, a copy of the Namasudra paper of Faridpur, the *Namasudra Suhrid*, which ventilated the grievances of the Namasudras, was found here.¹⁵⁴ It was 'an

undoubted fact' that the Namasudras of this region had started to regard themselves a superior caste and were apt to adopt a contemptuous attitude towards the Muslims whom they looked down upon as an inferior community. Formerly, they used to work as servants of the other castes of Hindus and Muslims. But gradually they gave up working for the Telis, Sundis and other low-caste Hindus. Occasionally, as we have seen earlier, they combined to boycott the upper caste Hindus, like the Kayasthas. And now they refused to serve the Muslims, with the result, that the latter had to employ imported, and therefore, expensive labour. This naturally embittered the feelings between the two communities. This Namasudra sensitiveness, arising out of their newly acquired sense of pride, added to this bitterness. Any supposed offence, however slight that might have been, given by a Muslim to any member of their caste, was taken as an insult to the community as a whole, requiring immediate punishment. Violent frictions between the two communities therefore occurred frequently, particularly in centres where the Namasudras were the predominating element and the Muslims were in the minority.¹⁵⁵

The Muslims, on the other hand, for generations considered the Namasudras as an inferior people and the recent assertion of a higher status by the latter was naturally a cause of irritation to them. This lack of toleration was amply revealed when a Khulna paper reprinted an article from a Muslim paper *Muhammadi*, violently criticising a recent pronouncement of the Nadia *pundits* that barbers might give their services to Namasudras. Although no copy of this paper was actually found in the affected area, this spirit of intolerance and irritation certainly pervaded the entire region. Moreover, during the last two years, there had been repeated disturbances, in all of which the Namasudras were the aggressors. The Muslims retaliated with violence and were, except only in the Nalichar case, successful. But in all cases they suffered more than the Namasudras in the criminal proceedings that followed.¹⁵⁶ They, therefore, had grounds for resentment and this was accentuated by the result of the Nalichar case in which, though greatly wronged, they failed to obtain satisfaction in the court. Their sentiments were further hurt by the haughtiness of the Namasudras who, after the announcement of the Nalichar judgement, allegedly 'gave several maunds of *batasha* [molasses – candy] as *Harir* – *loot* [offerings to lord Hari] and fell upon any and every Mahommadan they met on the *hat* with repeated *Haribole* [enchantment of the name of lord Hari]'. As a result, when the Barnal incident took place, religious colour was deliberately lent to what was essentially a petty land dispute, by spreading exaggerated stories that a mosque had been broken and the Koran defiled by the Namasudra

rioters. Lack of faith in 'whimsical' court, coupled with this whipping up of communal sentiments naturally led to a violent counter-attack.¹⁵⁷ The leading Muslims used their organisational networks to co-ordinate this attack and some of them, like Hatem Moulavi and Hoten Sheikh of Atlia, were even seen directing the operations on horseback.¹⁵⁸

Although there is no evidence to suggest the involvement of any outside agent instigating the rioters, there was a good deal of politicisation of the incident after it had taken place. The Hindu press wasted no time in seizing this opportunity to win over the Namasudras by supporting their cause and condemning Muslim rowdies. *Khulna Vasi* of 3 June 1911 reported that Namasudras were 'robbed of all their possessions by the Muslims'. *Basumati* of the same day criticised the recent Muslim tendency of uniting in a large body, even on the slightest provocation, and committing oppression on others.¹⁵⁹ The *Bengalee*, being more balanced, lamented the fact that the ignorant persons of both the communities were so short-sighted, that they forgot their obvious interests and took part in a quarrel that could spell nothing but disaster for the country.¹⁶⁰ However, the most violent criticism of the Muslims appeared in a leading article published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 25 May 1911. It alleged that an inflammatory and 'filthily abusive' pamphlet entitled *The Cow and Hindu-Muslim* had actually instigated the Muslims to attack the Namasudras and might cause further communal violence. Although the government wanted to describe these riots as purely local in nature, the Hindu leaders constantly tried to tag it on to the greater question of Hindu-Muslim relationship, as Surendranath Banerjea saw in them 'further evidence of the baneful effects of the Partition'.¹⁶¹

The Muslims of Jessore and Khulna, perturbed by such 'false' and 'exaggerated' reports in the Hindu press, appealed to the Nawab Bahadur of Dacca to represent their case to the government. In particular, they wanted the enquiries to be conducted by 'impartial officers', 'either Mahommadan or European'.¹⁶² Nawab Salimullah conveyed the prayer to the government, reiterating his 'implicit faith in the British administration of Justice'.¹⁶³ But the government refused to consider it, as a special officer had already been appointed and there was no reason to suppose that he would fail to try the cases with care and scrupulous fairness.¹⁶⁴ However, the controversial pamphlet was forfeited in June 1911, under the Indian Press Act.¹⁶⁵ Since then the enthusiasm and interests of the politicians seemed to be waning rapidly.

The riot of 1911 thus appears to have been caused by a court decision and a petty land dispute, each violating, in two different ways, the

collective sense of justice of the two peasant communities. Only subsequently was their dispute given a religious colour and even later this purely localised conflict was politicised and made into a part of the broader provincial politics. To put it into proper perspective, it must be mentioned here that this riot, which was preceded and followed by similar other incidents, was a part of a larger process through which the two communities were defining their identities. Along with confrontation there were instances of co-operation as well, as we have noted earlier, against the high-caste Hindu gentry, who were always up in the local power structure and were therefore considered by both of them as agents of oppression, both economic and social. The relationship between the two communities had thus taken a complex and criss-cross course. But there was one common thread which could bind all these varied situations into one composite frame, and that was the persistent urge on the part of both the communities, including the peasantry and also their wealthy influential leaders, to affirm their newly constructed respectable self-image. In order to achieve this goal of self-affirmation they had to use various symbols, which often amounted to violation of the accepted codes of reverent behaviour and led to frictions with various groups in different situations. It was through this process that the two communities constructed their distinctive identities and drifted further away from their common adversaries, the high-caste Hindus.

IV

The nationalist Hindus therefore felt the more urgent need to do something more constructive to confront this Namasudra dissent. The United Bengal Provincial Conference which was held in Faridpur on 9 and 10 September 1911 resolved 'to take earnestly in hand' an elaborate programme of 'social reform, especially [for] the elevation of the neglected classes'.¹⁶⁶ Lt Colonel U. N. Mukherjee, the author of *The Dying Race* (1909), was specially invited to participate in the 'Social Conference' which was supposed to organise 'attempts to improve the status of the Namasudras and other "depressed classes" and to bring them into the fold of organised Hinduism'.¹⁶⁷ But the ever widening gap between promise and achievement gave the Namasudras adequate reasons to suspect the sincerity of such attempts.

The Brahmo Samaj had also started social work among the untouchables through its Depressed Classes Mission founded in 1909 under the guidance of Sibnath Shastri. It started its first centre at Beras, a

Namasudra village in the district of Dacca. Then in different areas of Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, the Mission, under the able leadership of people like Harinarayan Sen, did admirable work among the Namasudras and others, providing them with free education and free medical care.¹⁶⁸ But even then, the record of the Depressed Classes Mission was extremely poor compared with the Christian missionary efforts. In 1911, at its annual meeting held in Calcutta, it was openly admitted that the Mission had not made much progress due to lack of finance.¹⁶⁹

Mere excuses were not, however, enough to impress an ambitious group like the Namasudras who were striving to put an end to their poverty, illiteracy and social disabilities. To them the record was more important and an unimpressive record was taken as an index of insincerity. The result was further alienation. Of course, not all the Namasudras behaved in the same way – at least some of their educated members were definitely thinking in other directions. Anathbandhu Gayen of Faridpur, for example, worked in close co-operation with Ambika Charan Mazumdar; and Bhyagai Halder of Bakarganj was a close associate of Aswini Datta.¹⁷⁰ Another less known figure, Ananda Chandra Sadhak is reported to have participated in and also spoken at the Calcutta Congress of 1906. Some of the younger Namasudras had also joined the secret revolutionary organisations such as the Anushilan Samiti.¹⁷¹ Keshab Chandra Das of Dacca was a *swadeshi* activist, who tried to counteract the loyalist influence of the Christian missionaries and endeavoured to secure influence and exercise authority over the Namasudra community, in order to mobilise them into the anti-government agitation. For this purpose, he also published a periodical called the *Namasudra*; its influence was officially regarded as 'dangerous'. But the larger Namasudra community offered only lukewarm response to such persuasions. Keshab was arrested for publishing seditious articles and his party was increasingly mistrusted, discredited and discarded by the majority of the Namasudras, acting under the guidance of people whom the authorities often considered to be the 'real leaders' of the community.¹⁷²

The extent of this disapproval can easily be measured from the history of the two papers related to the Namasudra movement. The *Namasudra Suhrid*, a 'non-political' monthly, published from Orakandi, the main nerve-centre of the movement, was the original organ of the caste. It was edited by Aditya Kumar Chaudhuri, a Namasudra *pundit* of the Upper Primary School, Rasiani (Faridpur); the proprietor was Sashi Bhusan Thakur, son of Guruchand, and the publisher was his younger brother Surendranath. The other periodical was *Namasudra*, started in late 1908

in Dacca in order to further the interests of the caste. It was owned, edited and published by Keshab Chandra Das of Chandshi (Dacca).¹⁷³ The tone of the paper, though sometimes offensive, was in general 'moderate'; but often it showed a tendency for attacking the high-caste Bengali government servants for allegedly neglecting the interests of the Namasudras.¹⁷⁴ From 31 March 1910 the paper ceased to be printed; it was revived once again from 14 July,¹⁷⁵ when the staff of the Jhalakati National School took it over in order 'to gain over the Namasudras to the agitation'. From now on it was edited by Anath Bandhu Sen, a Baidya teacher of the Jhalakati National School, and was published by a Kayastha of Ujirpur, Lakshmi Charan Das.¹⁷⁶ Around 1911, its tone was openly 'anti-government and disloyal' and its avowed objective was to mobilise 'the Namasudra class who were indifferent to the *swadeshi* agitation'. The *Namasudra Suhrid*, however, retained its earlier character and organisation and continued to be 'non-political' and 'chiefly social'.¹⁷⁷ What is important to note in this context is the ever-increasing popularity of the more moderate *Namasudra Suhrid* and the declining circulation of *Namasudra* since its take over by the nationalists. In 1908, the circulation of *Namasudra* was 500, while that of *Suhrid*, 550; in 1910, the year of the nationalist take over, the circulation of *Namasudra* went down to 300, while that of *Suhrid* to 450; but in 1911, the year of the census, while the circulation of *Namasudra* remained at 300, that of *Suhrid* shot up to 700.¹⁷⁸ The figures are perhaps adequate to give us a clear idea about the growing alienation of the Namasudras, at least of their educated section, from the cause of mainstream nationalism around the year 1911.

However, in the same year the nationalists had a real opportunity to win over the sympathy of the educated Namasudras by utilising Gokhale's Compulsory Elementary Education Bill. On 16 March 1911, Gokhale introduced his bill in the Legislative Council 'to make better provision for the extension of elementary education' by introducing gradually 'the principle of compulsion'.¹⁷⁹ The government response was not at all favourable. The Government of Bengal was 'opposed not merely to the specific provisions, but also to the introduction at the present juncture, of the general principles embodied in the Bill'.¹⁸⁰ Sir Lancelot Hare was more categorical in pointing out its actual political implications. In his opinion, it was 'premature and impolitic', for it would 'promote discontent and social unrest among the masses'.¹⁸¹ Moreover, it would inevitably involve special taxation which would breed further discontent – more especially because there was already a possibility of additional taxation to make good the loss of opium

revenue.¹⁸² The nationalists, on the other hand, gave full-throated support to the Bill. The United Bengal Provincial Conference in September and the Indian National Congress at its Calcutta session in December adopted resolutions in its favour and urged the government to enact it into law.¹⁸³ The local organisations and their leaders were at the same time active in mobilising popular support in favour of the Bill.¹⁸⁴ But the government's fear of a social revolution arising out of compulsory education was fully shared by the orthodox section of the society. A Hindu *zamindar* could not conceal his apprehensions when he wrote to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, that the

system of the wholesale spread of education for the masses . . . will cause a great and violent disturbance in every phase of the present settled order of things; and will throw the whole country, as it were, out of its equilibrium, and such a system . . . will not only . . . spoil the temper of the masses, but will tend to upset and disturb all the harmonious relations now existing between various classes and communities, domestic relations not escaping its disturbing influence.¹⁸⁵

Although the Bill was almost unanimously supported in some of its features by the vernacular press, the organs of the orthodox section of the community viewed it with considerable misgiving. They feared it was likely to foment social unrest by imparting to the lower classes a smattering of education and imbuing them with a spirit of insubordination and intolerance towards the higher classes. 'It is, therefore, better,' wrote the paper, *Hindu Ranjika*, 'that their children should remain altogether illiterate than have a very slight smattering of education.'¹⁸⁶

Such a proposal of the orthodox Hindus, however, could not be considered as 'better', by those who thought that for centuries they had been 'smarting under their yoke of bondage'.¹⁸⁷ In fact the Compulsory Elementary Education Bill was the only concrete nationalist proposal in which the Namasudras saw possibilities of fulfilment of their aspirations. Their organ *Namasudra Suhrid* wholeheartedly welcomed the Bill because of the chances of an elevation of their social status through primary education. It ascribed the backwardness of the community to poverty which was perpetuated over many years as their young men, without any education, had no other alternative but to pursue their hereditary occupations. The only agency through which the poor Namasudra children could get some education was the missionaries; but their efforts were often misrepresented. So in this grim situation the proposed extension of primary education on the basis of compulsion was

all the more welcome to them as to the other depressed sections of the society.¹⁸⁸

The nationalist leadership failed to make effective use of this sentiment. In December 1911 came the Durber Declaration about the annulment of Partition and in their jubilation the nationalist leaders failed to take note of the possibilities of using this issue to recognise and display their concern for the problems of the Namasudras and other depressed classes, and thus win over their sympathies, which had become necessary for the success of their political movements. In 1912, in recognition of his services to his community and to the Raj, Guruchand was honoured with a durbar medal, which was presented to him by Lord Carmichael at a special meeting at Faridpur district town.¹⁸⁹ On this occasion, Guruchand is known to have purchased a ceremonial dress at an exorbitant price of five hundred rupees.¹⁹⁰ What he thus desired was a spectacle that would be a shocking sight for the established elites of the society, but would generate in his own community a sense of collective pride for this recognition of their status by the state power. What the spectacle actually celebrated was the formation of a distinctive Namasudra community identity and their alienation from the politics of the nationalists. This community identity had been defined through a negation of the social authority of the high-caste Hindu *bhadralok* and their social and political ideologies. Of course, different sections of the community were motivated by different reasons; but all their grievances and aspirations converged at one point – in a common desire to contest the existing power structure that had kept them down for centuries. It was around this ideology of protest that their community solidarity was constructed. So complete was their alienation that even Gandhi's appeal in the subsequent days of Non-cooperation could not make any visible breakthrough – a phenomenon we will examine in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Continuing Alienation in an Age of Mass Politics, 1912–1925

I

The alienation of the Namasudras from nationalist politics had become almost a settled fact during the days of the *Swadeshi* movement, as they could in no way identify themselves with the aims and aspirations of the high-caste *bhadralok* fighting the British Raj on issues which hardly at all concerned them. This was true both for the Namasudra peasantry as well as their upwardly mobile leadership. This alienation continued as the peasantry in their hours of need could find no one to support them except the local officials of the colonial government. When, for example, the *bil* areas of Faridpur were inundated in 1913, destroying the crop and also the poor Namasudra peasants, it was the government which helped them, while the local nationalist leaders, such as Ambika Charan Mazumdar, showed total apathy.¹ It was not without good reason that the Namasudra leadership pinned their hopes on the colonial government. To establish cordial relations, in 1911 they sent special gifts to the King-Emperor through the Bishop of Calcutta.² Then a few months later, in July 1912, a Namasudra delegation met Lord Carmichael, the then Governor of Bengal, and requested him to extend state patronage to the members of their community as well.³ The colonial government, in response to such petitions, also generously offered numerous benefits and earned the Namasudra's gratitude.

The nationalists, in consequence, found it even more difficult to mobilise such backward castes as the Namasudras. In 1912, Keshab Chandra Das, one of the few Namasudras who had sympathies for the *Swadeshi* movement, started, along with some of his associates, the Bengal Namasudra Association with its headquarter in Calcutta. Keshab's brother Mohini Mohan became its Secretary and Mukunda

Behari Mullick its President. It was indeed another attempt to gain influence over the Namasudra masses and to integrate their movement into the mainstream of nationalist politics. But it failed to acquire a foothold in the Dacca Division, where the main concentration of the Namasudra population of Bengal lay. To the Namasudra middle class, Mohini Mohan was a suspect for his past connections with the *Swadeshi* movement, and Mukunda Behari in 1912 was still relatively a less-known figure. The association, as a result, maintained its precarious existence only on paper.⁴ It remained so at least until the days of the Home Rule agitation, when it too decided to shade out its nationalist character. This Namasudra alienation from the cause of nationalism could not be broken even during the Non-cooperation movement, when Gandhi's appeal was supposedly reaching down to the bottom layer of society and Indian nationalism was transcending the narrow confines of elite politics to enter the broader arena of mass agitation.⁵ Indeed, during the whole period, i.e., the second and the early part of the third decade of the twentieth century, both the colonial government and the nationalists in Bengal were involved in a tug-of-war to win the political support of the Namasudras, because both considered it to be a crucial factor in the existing political balance of power. For the time being, the administration had the better of their adversaries, as the latter persistently failed to address the caste question in a positive way.

Namasudra rejection of nationalist politics, in other words, was at least partly due to the active patronage of the colonial government and this patronage, one should remember, benefited not just the elites of the community. To give a few examples, in 1912 a financial grant was sanctioned for the construction of a new hostel building attached to the Widows' Industrial School and Home at Orakandi which had been functioning under the supervision of the Australian Baptist Mission.⁶ In this Namasudra centre, the Mission was also running the Orakandi High School for boys, mainly for the children of the poor Namasudras. Dr Mead, who was the President of the school committee, had reported to the government in 1909 that Orakandi being situated in the middle of the *bils* and the school being surrounded by water for six months in the year, hostel accommodation was an urgent necessity. In September 1911, the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam sanctioned for this purpose a capital grant; but no money was then actually paid. The proposal was once again renewed in August 1912,⁷ and the Government of Bengal, in view of its professed policy of encouraging the backward communities and the fact that Orakandi, under the guidance of Dr Mead, had become an important educational centre for such people,

sanctioned in October 1913 a capital grant of Rs. 10,000 for the construction of a Muslim and a Namasudra hostel attached to the Orakandi High School in Faridpur.⁸

Meanwhile, other special hostels for the Namasudra boys were also being set up by the government in various parts of eastern Bengal, as it was chiefly in matters of accommodation that the students of this community, because of their low ritual status, were facing the most serious difficulties. In Bakarganj, a Namasudra hostel, attached to Jhalakati Government High English School, had been opened sometime before 1912. It provided accommodation for twenty students, who were not charged any fee, and the hostel was always full to capacity.⁹ In the same district, two other hostels were opened for the Namasudras, one at Barisal and the other attached to the Pirojpur High English School.¹⁰ In Dacca, three special messes provided accommodation for about 100 school boys and twenty college students of this community, the government bearing the expenses for the house-rent and the superintendents' allowance. There was no separate mess at Rajshahi for the Namasudra boys, but a special mess attached to the Rajshahi College provided accommodation exclusively for the boys of the untouchable or the depressed classes, including the Namasudras. The students living in these messes were not charged any rent,¹¹ while in addition to that, free medical treatment was also provided for.¹²

But it was in Calcutta that the Namasudra students had to face the greatest difficulty in matters of accommodation. The problem attracted the attention of both the Hindu press and the Hindu nationalist leaders, as they found in it a convenient opportunity to publicly exhibit their concern, embarrass the government and win the sympathy of the Namasudras. The public debate that followed on the Calcutta Namasudra hostel constitutes a major episode in the story of the ongoing battle between the nationalists and the government to capture Namasudra support. The Hindu press suggested, first of all, that the government should open a special hostel for the Namasudra students in Calcutta, as was done in eastern Bengal.¹³ The nationalist legislators then repeatedly raised this demand on the floors of the Bengal Legislative Council, in order to highlight what they wanted to portray as a lack of real government concern for the sufferings of the Namasudras. In March 1913, Nilratan Sircar for the first time moved a resolution in the Council demanding 'special accommodation . . . for students of the depressed classes'. In support of the resolution, Surendranath Banerjea described in his usual eloquent way 'the considerable difficulty in getting hostel accommodation for Namasudra boys in Calcutta'. The government

responded approvingly, but promised to consider the problem only when adequate funds would be available for this purpose.¹⁴

Nothing, however, was done immediately. The following year in September, Surendranath therefore once again drew the attention of the government to the fact that 'the students of the Namasudra and other similar communities experience[d] great hardship in securing board and lodging accommodation in Calcutta'. In reply, Mr Samman, the Director of Public Instruction, stated that the Government was aware of the situation, although they did not receive any representation from the Namasudra community itself. As the university was already administering a general mess-scheme in Calcutta, the matter was left to them, with the confidence that the claims of the Namasudras and similar other castes would not be overlooked.¹⁵ Yet nothing happened, and so two years later, on 13 March 1916, the matter was again raised in the Council by Radha Charan Pal. The resolution moved by him recommended that 'a recurring grant of Rs. 1,200 a year be made over to the [sic] Calcutta University for providing the Namasudra and other students of the backward classes with hostel accommodation in the town of Calcutta'. Years had passed since Nilratan Sircar had raised the issue in the Council, Pal argued in support of his resolution, but 'nothing has yet been done as regards these depressed classes'. He, therefore, wanted an item to be entered in the budget proposal, so that the assurance given by the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) was not forgotten later. The resolution received its most eloquent support from Debaprasad Sarbadhikari, the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University. A deputation of about thirty Namasudra students had requested him to do something in this matter. They were too poor to pay for the scheme themselves, while the university was also constrained by the paucity of funds. Hence some temporary arrangements had to be made as an 'immediate relief', he pleaded, as these students could not get admission to any mess, except through deception, i.e., by concealing their real caste identity by adopting Kayastha surnames. He, therefore, wanted the government to consider the proposal sympathetically, so that the university could start immediately a hostel for about thirty or forty Namasudra boys.¹⁶ But the government considered this resolution 'premature', as the University had not as yet submitted any detailed proposal, and therefore, refused to accept its financial responsibility. The resolution was ultimately rejected by twenty-three votes to sixteen.¹⁷

Three days later, on 16 March 1916, Surendranath Banerjea raised the issue once again, this time at the central legislative council. Although the Namasudras had made considerable progress in education, he said, their

main social grievance had remained unredressed, i.e., the higher castes still refused to accept food or water touched by them or admit them into their dining rooms. Therefore, as it happened in his Ripon College, the higher caste students, even if they agreed to live with them in the same room, would not under any circumstances dine with them. Banerjea, therefore, urged the government to come forward in the rescue of the poor Namasudras and assist them in their way to progress, by establishing schools, hostels and co-operative credit societies, admitting them in greater numbers in the public services and above all, by helping the organisations which were already at work for their social upliftment.¹⁸ But so far as a hostel in Calcutta was concerned, nothing was done during the following year.

A year later, in March 1917, Calcutta University managed to send a definite proposal to the government for constructing two special hostels, one for the Buddhists and the other for the depressed classes, by utilising the anticipated savings from the grants assigned for the undergraduate hostels in Calcutta.¹⁹ But Mr Hornell, the then DPI, smelled politics in it. As for the depressed classes, he believed, Dr Sarbadhikari was thinking mainly of the Namasudras, who were being backed up for political reasons. In view of scarce funds, the proposal therefore could not be supported: 'If a Namasudra can by the simple device of calling himself "Ghose" pass as a Kayastha', he remarked in a half-contemptuous way, 'we need scarcely hold up our hands in horror and unloose the public purse strings.' A much sounder way of providing for students of these classes would be to make arrangements at the local colleges.²⁰ The government therefore concluded that the improvement of the girls' hostel attached to the Bethune College in Calcutta was a more urgent reform for furtherance of female education in this Presidency and decided to spend the anticipated savings on this project.²¹

It was possibly only for political reasons that the government did not pay much attention to a proposal which was coming from the nationalists; but it could hardly deny the actual necessity of such a hostel in Calcutta. Therefore, when in July 1917, Radha Charan Pal again raised a question to this effect in the Bengal Legislative Council, Mr Hornell had to admit that 'in Calcutta the students of the Namasudra community [were] . . . subjected to great hardship and trouble for want of accommodation'.²² Nine months later, in May 1918, the government finally recognised the 'desirability' of such a hostel and decided that as 'an experimental measure', a mess for the Namasudras and another for the Jogis, each under a resident superintendent, would be started in Calcutta, under the supervision of the university, with the government

providing a special grant of Rs. 3,000 per annum for the purpose.²³ Two houses were then immediately rented and two Superintendents were appointed. In view of the poverty of the majority of the students concerned and the fact that in Dacca and Rajshahi they were allowed to live in hostels free of charge, it was decided to fix the individual rent at only three rupees a month for places in the upper floor rooms and two rupees for the ground floor ones.²⁴ However, the two buildings engaged accommodated far fewer students than originally contemplated. The number of available places in the Jogi hostel at 30 Cornwallis Street was sixteen, of which one but all were taken by August. The Namasudra hostel at 10 Simla Street had twenty-six places, of which eleven upper and five ground floor vacancies were occupied by August 1918.²⁵

Thus the long-debated Namasudra hostel came into existence in Calcutta. It would not have been possible without the nationalist support for the scheme; but ultimately it was the government which provided it. It was, therefore, the colonial state, and not the nationalist leadership, which won the gratitude of the educated Namasudras, who now felt much more inclined to the former and drifted further away from the latter. The nationalists thus played their game merely to the advantage of the colonial government. By lending only verbal support and not initiating any concrete action, they unwittingly allowed the government to usurp the initiative and project its benevolent image, which had an obvious appeal for the upwardly mobile sections of the depressed classes.

The generous patronage that the colonial government offered to the Namasudras was, however, most crucial in the field of primary education, as it benefited the peasantry as well. In March 1918, O'Malley, who was then in charge of the education department, claimed credit for the education of 41,105 Namasudras (36,932 boys and 5,173 girls) who were under instruction in Bengal Presidency during 1916-17. Of them, 100 boys were reading in colleges, 1,489 boys were in the high school stage, 1,690 boys were in the middle school stage and 32,087 boys and 5,138 girls were in the primary school stage. The rest were reading in special and indigenous schools.²⁶ This assistance was never discontinued during the subsequent period. In fact, whenever the Namasudras applied for any government aid, it was hardly ever refused. Even schools initially started by the nationalists, as the one in village Aguljhara in Bakarganj district started by Aswini Kumar Datta's close associate Bhyagai Halder,²⁷ was given a special grant in November 1918.²⁸ In May 1919, the Widows' Industrial School and Home in Orakandi received a fresh grant for the acquisition of a plot of land to extend the existing compound.²⁹ Ordinarily, the government contribution to the scheme

should have been half of the total cost. But this being a 'special case', the DPI, by using his discretionary power, proposed to make a grant of two-thirds of the estimated cost.³⁰

In Faridpur town a number of Namasudra students, about twenty-five of them, were in need of some sort of mess or hostel accommodation in 1921. The local members of the community held a meeting in August and resolved to request the government to establish a Namasudra mess in that town. As regards the cost, the community was willing to pay half of the house rent and one-fourth of the Superintendent's allowance, and expected the local college authorities to provide some help. The appeal to government immediately brought favourable response. The college authorities agreed to provide free medical attendance at the hostel³¹ and the government in October 1922 sanctioned the scheme without any hesitation. The preliminary arrangements had already been completed: a house had been rented and a Superintendent appointed. The mess started without delay.³²

But more important than this was the fact that in the same district, around November 1922, there were 11,940 Namasudra students reading in Middle English, upper primary and lower primary schools, 'managed mainly by the Namasudras.' Most of these schools were receiving aid, either directly from the government under the grant-in-aid scheme or from the district board. According to a report, eight Middle English schools, nine upper primary schools, 117 lower primary schools for boys and forty lower primary schools for girls, managed by the Namasudras in Faridpur, were receiving government aid in 1922, apart from fifteen Board Primary Schools functioning exclusively for them.³³ Thus, although directed towards the top layer of the community, the government support for Namasudra education, which was by no means insubstantial, was also benefiting people at the bottom as well. Around the same time, some of the indigenous voluntary associations, like the Bengal Social Service League, the Society for the Improvement of the Backward Classes or the Depressed Classes Mission, were running schools for the education of the backward classes such as the Namasudras.³⁴ But what they could offer was trivial in comparison with the substantial support that the latter received from the government.

The 'Namasudra youths even when educated cannot enter government service' – this was an old complaint of their leaders. And this, they thought, was one of the major impediments that restricted the advancement of learning among their caste members, consequently inhibiting their upward social movement. Demand for government jobs was, therefore, a major feature of the Namasudra movement from its

inception.³⁵ The nationalist leadership, in their haste to patronise the Namasudras, also began to raise the issue before the legislative bodies and thus once again placed the ball in the court of the colonial government. Surendranath Banerjea, as we have already noted, had mentioned it in the Imperial Legislative Council in March 1916, and had urged the government to admit the Namasudras in greater numbers in the public services. Nilratan Sircar, in August 1917, brought the matter before the Bengal Legislative Council. A considerable number of young men belonging to the Namasudra and other backward communities had qualified themselves for university degrees. But did the government, he asked, offer these persons any special facilities for obtaining service under government? In reply, the DPI, Mr Hornell, made a carefully drafted non-controversial statement: 'Applications from suitably qualified persons belonging to these communities are carefully considered . . . but no special privileges are given.' True, at that time only one Deputy Collector and one Sub-Deputy collector were Namasudras.³⁶ But departmental enquiries revealed that in many departments, like Revenue or General, 'every facility . . . [was] given to the members of the depressed class to obtain appointments'.³⁷ The government, it appears, still hesitated to come out in the open, perhaps due to political reasons.

But during the following years, in the 1920s, both due to practical necessities and political exigencies, government policies began to change quite significantly and openly. In 1922, restricted competition among nominated candidates was introduced for recruitment to the Provincial Services. The new system, however, incorporated definite provisions for communal representation, in the sense that no fewer than one-third of the candidates nominated for examination had to be Muslims, and no fewer than one-sixth either Anglo-Indians or members of the depressed classes. The same proportions were also to be followed in matters of appointment, although it was felt that this would give the depressed classes 'more appointments than there . . . [would] be qualified candidates forthcoming from these classes'.³⁸ In the Selection Committee, that was constituted for this purpose, Bhishmadeb Das, a Namasudra advocate from Faridpur and a nominated member of the Legislative Council, was to represent the depressed classes.³⁹ In the first examination there were thirty-four nominated candidates from such classes, including four Namasudras. But the results of the examination made Bhishmadeb realise that grouped as they were with the Anglo-Indians, the depressed classes could not compete on equal terms. He therefore urged the government to provide for separate nomination for them,⁴⁰ as past experience, he believed, definitely called for such a

provision. During the last five-year period, between 1917 and 1921, in his own district Faridpur out of thirty-five Namasudra candidates for different categories of government services, only one had secured an appointment as a Sub-Registrar in 1918.⁴¹ So now he claimed for the Namasudras an exclusive right to this reserved quota, because they had been the most vigorous group in asking for it. But the government was not yet prepared to accept this demand fully. First of all, it seemed to be 'separatist in tendency and opposed to the spirit of competition', although in the case of the Muslims they felt compelled to pursue this policy because of 'historical and other good reasons'. Secondly, in view of the insufficient number of Namasudra graduates, as given in the Calcutta University Commission Report recently, it seemed quite 'absurd' to give them one-sixth of the appointments, particularly disregarding the legitimate claims of others, like the Mahishyas or the Rajbansis.⁴² Yet they were not to be totally disappointed either. The next year's Selection Committee was therefore instructed to give 'every possible consideration to the claims of the backward classes.' And if in spite of that, any of these classes remained unrepresented, the government could nominate qualified candidates from among them.⁴³

When such concrete concessions were constantly forthcoming from the colonial government, and some of them benefited even the rural masses and not just the elites, indigenous upper-caste endeavours for their upliftment failed one after another. The Depressed Classes Mission, for example, had been doing good work for the education of the Namasudras and other backward communities in different parts of Bengal. Around 1916 it changed its name into Society for the Improvement of the Backward Classes. During this time, it had been running about sixty schools, primary and Middle English, in the districts of Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore, Bakarganj, Noakhali, Tippera and Rangpur. But the shortage of fund was the main constraint that limited its activities.⁴⁴ To overcome this problem, the Secretary of the Society in 1918 applied for a government grant which was sanctioned. But as a condition, the activities of the Society were subjected to a close supervision by the education department.⁴⁵ The organisation, as a result, lost its independent character and when from 1922 all government grants for the improvement of schools for the backward classes began to be distributed through this body,⁴⁶ it virtually became an agency of the British government. From now on the credit for everything it did naturally passed on to the latter, at least in the perception of the Namasudra leaders, who were not unaware of these institutional developments.

Another story of failure was that of the Namasudra Provident and Banking Corporation. The co-operative credit movement in general had failed in Bengal because of misappropriation of funds by those who were in charge of management;⁴⁷ and this corporation was no exception. It was started in Gaurnadi police station in Bakarganj district to serve the 'poor and illiterate' depositors of the Namasudra community of that area. But soon the company became almost defunct due to misappropriation of funds by its managing agent Keshab Chandra Das, and so outraged were the policy-holders that the ordinary agents could not show themselves in public for fear of being assaulted.⁴⁸ Complaints were lodged with the Gaurnadi police station against the managing agent, and the account books and registers of the company were seized. The government now came forward in the rescue of the poor depositors. The Registrar of the Joint Stock Companies appointed Thomas A. Palmer to hold an enquiry.⁴⁹ On the basis of his investigations, completed in September 1915, the Managing Agent was prosecuted for professional swindling and criminal misappropriation. The registration of the Company was cancelled and it went into liquidation.⁵⁰

Thus while official efforts had been achieving a great deal for the benefit of the Namasudras, the indigenous efforts, though there were only a few of them, faltered one after another. There were, of course, many among the Bengali intelligentsia who had realised that political development of the nation would be impossible to achieve without social reform, particularly the improvement of the lower castes and classes.⁵¹ But the political leadership had only oral sympathies to offer and the Congress continued to avoid what it considered to be sensitive social issues. Under the circumstances, gratitude and a sense of attachment to British government and a corresponding suspicion of and alienation from the higher caste nationalist leadership, were perhaps the only responses expected of the Namasudras during this period.

II

Home Rule movement was the next major nationalist political agitation in Bengal since the days of *swadeshi*. The beginning of this movement in Bengal may be traced back to the visit of Mrs Annie Besant to Calcutta in October 1915, when she delivered a lecture on 'Home Rule for India' at a meeting held under the presidency of Surendranath Banerjea. In 1916, a Home Rule League was started in Calcutta and a number of meetings, both in Calcutta and the mufassil, in late 1916 and early 1917,

popularised the movement among the educated Bengalees.⁵² But there were many adversaries as well. The British government from the very beginning disapproved of the movement and preferred a 'gradual and orderly' devolution of power to the sudden 'upheaval of the constitution' as demanded by the Home Rule Leagues. The process had to coincide, as they thought, with the spread of education, elimination of the 'causes of disunion' and the gaining of 'political experience' by the 'larger numbers among the vast population of India'.⁵³ The *Moslem Hitaishi*, an organ of the Bengali Muslims, believed that Home Rule would sooner or later lapse into Hindu rule.⁵⁴ The moderate paper, *Indian Mirror*, branded the agitation as 'engineered by a very small fraction of the Indian population' which did not 'in any way represent the masses that constitute real India'.⁵⁵ The Namasudra response was also in the same tune. As the nationalists demanded self-government, the educated members of this caste apprehended that if more power was transferred, it would only be monopolised by the more privileged upper castes. The high-caste people, as an educated Namasudra put it, were perturbed by the rise of the lower castes who had been challenging their previous social dominance. Since this rise had been made possible by the introduction of British rule, the high-caste leaders were agitating for Home Rule and if they achieved it, they would once again push the advancing lower castes down to their former subordinate position in society.⁵⁶ In 1916, two Namasudra papers were started: one was *Namasudra Hitaishi*, published from Dacca and the other was *Pataka*, published from Calcutta and edited by Mukunda Behari Mullick.⁵⁷ In the first year of its publication, the latter contained a revealing editorial:

It has been due to education received through the favours of the British Government that we have now realised what we are, and how great is our strength . . . why should we worry any longer? The British Government itself has now come to the aid of the uneducated; they have ever been the help of the poor, and the hope of the downtrodden castes.⁵⁸

The editorial was definitely an indicator of the attitudes of Mukunda Behari, the editor of the journal, and also perhaps of the Bengal Namasudra Association, of which he was the President. In fact, around this time this organisation too had been alienated from the nationalists and had become more reliant on the protective shelter of the government. On 20 July 1917, a deputation led by the President of the Association met Lord Ronaldshay, the then Governor of Bengal,⁵⁹ apprised him of the condition and the needs of the Namasudras and requested him to

extend state patronage to the members of their community. The Governor did not disappoint them, but gave a non-committal reply:

The Government desires to make no distinction between one caste and another; . . . that is the Government is prepared so far as patronage is concerned, to give equal opportunities to the members of all communities who proved themselves competent, and you may rest assured that Government will consider not only fairly, but also sympathetically, the claims of such members of your community as have proved themselves competent.⁶⁰

But though non-committal, the statement promised equal opportunities and indicated the future possibility of favoured treatment. What was more important was the recognition that the delegation received from the government. This increased the political credibility of the Association, made it more acceptable to the Namasudra masses, particularly in Dacca Division, and led consequently to its revitalisation. The need for organising district unions was now emphasised and with those local unions the provincial association could be reorganised to represent the considered views of the entire community in the whole province. Important local men in each district were nominated to undertake this work of organisation and as a result of their endeavours, some such unions actually came into existence in Faridpur and Dacca.⁶¹ But the traditional leadership of the Namasudra community, particularly the Orakandi and Dacca groups, do not seem to have fully accepted this new organisation, although Mukunda's brother Nirod Behari Mullick, as we shall see later, appears to have received the patronage of Guruchand during the next election to the reformed council. Such support notwithstanding, this was undoubtedly the beginning of rival centres of leadership within the Namasudra movement. The differences, more of personality than of ideology, increasingly became prominent during the subsequent decades. It was, in other words, from this period that the movement began to show signs of disunity and to pull in different directions.

However, this was also the time when the Montagu-Chelmsford Reform proposal was announced, which unnerved the entire Namasudra leadership. Some of them now organised demonstrations against Home Rule, with the help of the Baptist Missionaries, in different mufassil areas, especially in Dacca. Others in the winter of 1917 decided for the first time to hold a provincial political meeting in Calcutta, allegedly with the help and encouragement of the European businessmen, also worried about the Home Rule agitation.⁶² The proposed meeting took place on 3

November 1917, at the Dalhousie Institute, and was participated by about thirty representatives from all the districts of Bengal. These delegates were reported to have been previously elected in special meetings at their respective places and thus claimed to represent an estimated two million Namasudras of the province. The meeting, presided over by Purna Chandra Mullick, a prominent Namasudra leader from Faridpur, lasted for nearly five hours and passed about sixteen resolutions.⁶³ Of these, the following four were most important, as they made explicit the attitude of the educated Namasudras towards the reform scheme and to the British Government:

- 1 Resolved that this Conference expresses its sincere loyalty to the Emperor of India and pray for the early victory of the British flag.
- 2 This conference declare its strong protest against the mis-representations that there exist no caste distinctions and no oppression by the zamindars and so forth submitted to the arbiters of Indian destiny by a handful of so-called leaders in the name of the public.
- 3 This conference expresses its approval of the speech of the Right Hon'ble Mr E. S. Montagu of the 28th August and the speech of His Excellency the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford of the 5th September last and *if any additional power is withdrawn from the British Government and vested in the hands of a few leaders without giving any share of power to us it will make the future progress of the backward classes impossible.*
- 4 A Committee be formed with its representatives to acquaint the Secretary of State with the grievances and complaints of the Namasudra community.⁶⁴

The resolutions show that the Namasudra leadership was not opposed to reforms announced by Montagu and Chelmsford; but they apprehended that high-caste Hindu leaders would not allow them a share of power, without which their future improvement would be impossible. 'The apprehension', wrote *Bengalee*, 'is baseless'⁶⁵ and the conference was condemned in unison by the entire Hindu nationalist leadership who detected behind it the hands of 'Anglo-Indian wire-pullers'. The thirty representatives attending the meeting were described by *Bengalee* as 'a handful of Namasudras hunting for appointments' and trying to 'curry favour with their Anglo-Indian patrons'. It cautioned, 'Let the deluded representatives of the Namasudras reflect upon the fact' that for over a century and a half, they had been under bureaucratic rule,

with little or no improvement in their status; and now 'do they want to hug their chains and perpetuate the present system?' The permanence of bureaucratic rule would not improve their status. That could 'only be done by the educated leaders of the Hindu community'. For it was they, who were 'most anxious to uplift the Namasudras and the backward classes'. There were organisations for this purpose and even though they had achieved little, 'they have at least created a moral atmosphere favourable to the uplifting of the Namasudras . . . Self-government would . . . strengthen the hands of the friends of the backward classes by investing them with the political power needed for their uplift'.⁶⁶

But the Namasudras, as we have already noted, had little faith in such high caste promises, the real nature of which was soon revealed in another contemptuous remark in the same nationalist paper. After characteristically affirming that 'those Namasudras who are opposing Home Rule are either idiots or victims of the enemies of the country', it asserted that the meeting was 'fictitious' and the Namasudras should not be so precipitate in their demands for representation in the Council. 'Let the Namasudras wait a few years more and have more education and their ambition will be satisfied in due course. No one can jump at the top of the tree; he must climb it up in a regular way.'⁶⁷ What the Namasudras understood from such statements was only contempt and a total lack of understanding of their problems. In March 1918 in a lecture at the Home Rule League Hall, the nationalist leader Manoranjan Guhathakurta tried to argue that Home Rule would not mean a Brahmanic oligarchy and that democratic system would be most beneficial to the lower caste masses.⁶⁸ But in an atmosphere of distrust and contempt, such reasoned pleas could hardly appeal to the Namasudra leaders.

The important thing which most of the Bengal nationalists overlooked at that time, was the fact that the Namasudras were not the only group in India who were reacting in this way. The leaders of the non-Brahman movements in Madras and Bombay were sharing the same apprehensions and this had forced the Congress to address the caste question. It was a week after the Dalhousie Institute meeting at Calcutta, that some of the Congress reformers called the famous Depressed Classes conference in Bombay on 11 November 1917 under the chairmanship of Sir Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar. It resolved that the Depressed Classes should be able to elect their own representatives to the legislative councils in proportion to their numbers and urged upon the higher castes to 'remove the blot of degradation from the depressed classes'. This conference was still sympathetic to the Congress and supported the 1916 Congress-

League scheme of self-government. But the two other non-Brahman meetings that followed in Bombay had much less faith in the nationalist demand for self-rule and clamoured more directly either for proportional representation or for separate electorate like the Muslims.⁶⁹ In Madras also, the non-Brahmans, divided as they were between the members of the Justice Party and the Congress non-Brahmans now organised under the new Madras Presidency Association, had different attitudes to Home Rule. But they were 'united in their demand for some form of communal representation', as they 'believed that the only way to prevent Brahmans from assuming power under the new constitutional regime was to assure non-Brahmans a special position in the franchise arrangement'.⁷⁰ So now it had become absolutely necessary for the Congress to do something to alleviate the fears of the lower castes and untouchables and prevent such overt expressions of separatism that were undermining its demand for self-rule. Through the Lucknow Pact it had ensured a closer co-operation with the Muslims; but the depressed classes and the non-Brahmans still continued to challenge its claim to represent the nation.

It was in such circumstances that the Calcutta Congress met in December 1917 under the presidency of Mrs Besant. It demanded the 'establishment of responsible government in India' through the immediate implementation of the 'Congress-League scheme of reform', i.e., the Lucknow Pact of 1916. This time the Congress could not ignore the social question and adopted for the first time a resolution that emphasised 'the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom on the Depressed Classes.' This was certainly a move to win over such classes all over India, as the wordings were borrowed from the resolutions passed at the last Bombay conference. But the symbolic gesture that followed was perhaps more interesting, as Bhyagai Haldar, a Namasudra Congressite from Bakarganj, was introduced to the audience by Surendranath Banerjea, amidst great applause, as the representative of the depressed classes attending the session and was allowed the privilege of formally supporting the resolution on self-government (Resolution No. XII) along with the Congress stalwarts Bepin Pal, Tilak, C. R. Das, Sarojini Naidu and Madan Mohan Malaviya. The resolution had been moved by Surendranath himself and was seconded by Jinnah.⁷¹ But the strategy ultimately did not bear fruit, as the depressed classes were no longer to be impressed by mere symbolic actions and Haldar came to be caricatured as a puppet in the hands of the self-seeking upper caste politicians.⁷² Their search for constitutional safeguards for their political rights therefore continued.

The next year (i.e. 1918), on the same day (3 November) and at the same venue (Dalhousie Institute), another Namasudra conference was held, this time under the auspices of the Bengal Namasudra Association. Influential Namasudra representatives from all over Bengal, in all numbering about 300, attended the conference. It was presided over by Chaitanya Krishna Mandal of Mymensingh and was addressed by Mukunda Behari Mullick, Nirod Behari Mullick, Birat Chandra Mandal, Rasiklal Biswas and Prasanna Kumar Das, all of whom were to acquire prominence in Bengal politics a few years later.⁷³ A special feature of this year's conference was the representation of some other backward castes as well, such as Paundra-Kshatriya, Rajbansi and Kapali. The conference first of all registered its protest against the structure of the two constitutional enquiry committees; namely, the Transferred Subjects Committee and the Franchise Committee, as there were none on their staff who could 'represent the views of the Namasudra community and of the other castes similarly situated in Bengal, Madras and Bombay'. Then a report on the Montagu-Chelmsford Reform proposal, 'embodying the views of the Namasudra community numbering about two millions of His Majesty's loyal subjects in Bengal', was 'unanimously' adopted. To start with, the report endorsed the resolutions of the last year's conference, which had accepted the reform announcement of 20 August. But it was apprehended at the same time that the Reform scheme, as it stood, would not ensure a 'truly responsible government', and therefore, it needed to be 'properly examined'. First of all, electorates should legitimately consist of 'all the 190 castes of the Hindu Society in proportion to their respective numbers', so that 'the oligarchy of a handful of limited castes' was prevented. The 'antagonistic nature of interests' between the advanced castes and the backward classes should also be taken into proper consideration. The local bodies, the report further argued, should be the domain where 'the first instalment of gradual and progressive realisation of responsible government would be confined'. At the provincial level, the backward classes would be satisfied with nomination system and would depend on the support of the sympathetic Governors as a 'safeguard' against the oligarchy. But if there was at all any transference of power at the provincial level, '*communal representation must be granted*, for it is in that way alone that the interests of so many different castes can be safeguarded to some extent'. Moreover, the report also disapproved of 'a sudden advance towards the Indianisation of the Civil Service', as it would 'impair the British [i.e., impartial] character of the administration'. The process, if at all initiated, should be slow and gradual and in

proportion to an all-round diffusion of education among all the classes. If this was not done, and the scheme was introduced in its present form, it would seem as if 'the profound loyalty of the overwhelming majority of the Hindu community . . . [was] utterly forgotten, whereas artificial agitation . . . [was] valued at a premium'. It would lead to two possible results:

- (1) The permanent installation of an oligarchy . . . which means a death blow to the responsible government itself; or (2) a slow but continuous discontent, after gathering strength, dethrones the oligarchy and the whole experiment fall [sic] with a sound more violent in character than what the Bolsheviks have caused in Russia.⁷⁴

In December 1918, Mukunda Behari Mullick submitted the resolution and the 'Report' to the Governor for proper consideration and wanted, as wished by the delegates at the conference, to record his oral evidence, on behalf of the Namasudra community, before the two constitutional enquiry committees. The conference, he claimed, was 'thoroughly representative', because, 'since the publication of the report of the conference no dissentient note . . . [had] been raised by any Namasudra or by the member of any other backward caste'. The Namasudras had always been loyal in the past and therefore, he emphasised, must now be rewarded. If the present Reform scheme was implemented at 'the bidding of a vociferous and small band of organised castes pretending to represent the interest of the masses', it would 'weaken the impartial hand of the British administrators'. This, he apprehended, would certainly be detrimental to the interests of the backward classes.⁷⁵

For the government it was now too late to make fresh arrangements to hear the oral evidence of any further witnesses, but their case was promised a sympathetic consideration.⁷⁶ The subsequent frantic appeals by a number of Bengali intellectuals could not therefore change the mind of the estranged Namasudras. More so, because they only made more glaring the expanding gap between rhetoric and reality. For example, when Srinath Datta argued in an article in *Nabyabharat* that in Congress every caste from Brahman to Bagdi or from Kayastha to Keora had equal rights, he was certainly not representing the real situation there. His plea that the new electoral system would never mean any domination of a particular caste over others,⁷⁷ could therefore hardly appeal to anyone. The noted scientist Prafulla Chandra Ray, in a meeting on 21 March 1920, assured the Namasudras that the new reform scheme by giving them the voting right would actually facilitate their advancement. There

was no fear of a Brahman rule, he argued, as no one trying to build 'India as a nation . . . would be able to exclude them from it'.⁷⁸ The grammarian Madhusudan Kabyabyakarantirtha conceded in a treatise that the Namasudras were opposing the reform proposal for not so quite illegitimate reasons. There was no scriptural injunction against accepting food and water from their hands. So unless this reform was initiated immediately, he cautioned the nationalists, independence would continue to elude all their efforts.⁷⁹ Another noted Bengali scientist, Meghnad Saha, also emphasised at the Bengal Youth Conference in 1922 that India's problems were not only political, but social too, and these included that of untouchability.⁸⁰ But such intellectuals could hardly change the mind of the politicians like Bepin Chandra Pal, who were still insisting to 'reconquer the country first', and then think of democratic reforms.⁸¹ It was no wonder therefore that the Namasudras in 1920 reiterated their demand for separate representation and claimed for their caste reservation of no less than one-third of all the non-Muhammadan seats in the Bengal Legislative Council.⁸²

The British government, in the meantime, was also seriously pondering over the question of depressed classes' representation in the reformed Council. The Franchise Committee recommended that the views of these classes should be represented in the Council by a nominated member and the Joint Select Committee observed that this representation, if necessary, should be increased by additional nomination in proportion to their numerical strength. The Government of India Act of 1919 formally recognised their 'special needs' by providing for inclusion of a depressed classes' representative among the nominated non-official members of the Bengal Legislative Council. The Government of Bengal agreed that one such member would be adequate, as it was difficult to find more suitable non-official candidates from among these people. Of all these groups, it was argued, only the Namasudras had come to the forefront and submitted representations. They also had among them a sizeable educated section, including some officials and professionals. So, suitable non-official candidates could perhaps be found to represent them; but it was doubtful whether such candidates could be found for the other castes as well. Moreover, so far as the Namasudras were concerned, given their numerical strength, they were also expected to secure representation through the general electorates. In fact, the President of the Bengal Namasudra Association had already informed the government that the community was likely to capture three or four seats in the general constituencies.⁸³ More nominated seats for them were, therefore, considered unnecessary.

But the results of the election of 1921 proved that all these calculations were wrong. However numerically superior they might have been in their own localities, most of the Namasudras, many of whom were poor cultivators, did not have the voting right because of the high property qualifications. The candidates, on the other hand, due to their inexperience, lacked the electioneering skill. The results were quite obvious. Almost all the Namasudra candidates, including Mukunda Behari Mullick, lost the election and this was despite the fact that the Congress was boycotting it. The only successful candidate was Nirod Behari Mullick who got elected from Barisal. Guruchand Thakur is said to have played a crucial role in mobilising Namasudra votes in his support. But the *guru* could hardly do anything in other constituencies, where most of the Namasudras possibly did not have the voting right. Bhishmadeb Das, who had lost the election to a caste Hindu in Faridpur, was later nominated by the government to represent the depressed classes in the Legislative Council.⁸⁴ Hence, as it appears, it was ultimately on the special constitutional provisions, i.e., on government patronage, that the Namasudras had to rely upon to secure representation for themselves in the newly constituted representative body. This naturally increased their dependence on the Raj; its political implications were certainly not very encouraging for the nationalists.

III

The Non-cooperation movement had started in the meanwhile and Gandhi had proposed to change the terms of Indian politics. At its Nagpur session in December 1920, where the Congress had decided to launch the movement, it was also resolved that in order to establish *swaraj* within one year, every effort would be made 'to settle disputes between Brahmins and non-Brahmins and . . . to rid Hinduism of reproach of untouchability'.⁸⁵ In many of his speeches also, Gandhi reiterated the necessity of the abolition of untouchability as a precondition for mobilising the masses.⁸⁶ As a result, as it is often emphasised, his appeal began to reach deep down to the bottom layer of the deprived, the tribals and the untouchables. In Bengal, the movement started with great enthusiasm under the leadership of C. R. Das, and from the middle of 1921 rapidly gained momentum in districts like Midnapur, Burdwan, Nadia, Rajshahi, Chittagong, Rangpur and Tippera. The 'pathetic contentment' of the masses was disturbed, though temporarily, in a manner not contemplated by the colonial

government.⁸⁷ But in areas which contained major concentration of the Namasudra population, particularly in Faridpur and Bakarganj, the countryside remained less affected. Gandhi himself visited Barisal to promote the campaign for boycott of foreign goods. But his appeal was particularly unsuccessful and the Barisal Congress committee, previously one of the most active centres of agitation, had only to lament 'the apathy of the general public'.⁸⁸ This apathy was largely due to the non-participation of the Namasudra peasantry, who constituted a sizeable section of the population in this part of Bengal. They remained, under the effective guidance of a socially ambitious leadership, steadfast in their rejection of the nationalist politics. What motivated them to organise this political dissent against the current tide of mass nationalism is a question that needs to be seriously addressed at this point.

It was in 1921, when the Non-cooperation movement had gathered its full momentum, that an educated Namasudra wrote: 'Motherland is greater than heaven, say the wisemen; but one's own caste is greatest of all, can there be anything comparable to it!' To him it was only for their benefit that God had sent to this country the 'impartial British', under whose egalitarian rule they had for the first time received enlightenment and could compete for the fruits of civilisation⁸⁹ – a sentiment shared certainly by many others of his community as well. According to the biographer of Guruchand, C. R. Das himself had personally written to him to ensure the participation of the Namasudras in the Non-cooperation movement. But he refused to respond, for he believed that this movement too, like the earlier one, was only meant to further the interests of the wealthy upper caste *bhadralok*. The Namasudras, in his opinion, were poor uneducated peasants, who neither understood politics, nor had any conception of independence. The way he explained the situation to his ignorant disciples reveals clearly his perceptive judgement on the nature of the nationalist movement. In an average high-caste extended family, the *guru* expounded, usually one brother was a lawyer, the second a clerk, while the third was a trader. So while the lawyer-brother would leave the court to join the Non-cooperation movement, the clerk would retain his job to maintain the family and, as Guruchand pungently remarked, the businessman-brother would actually make profit by selling *khadi*. So the poor Namasudra peasants who had nothing to do with any office, court or trade, need not participate in this movement. If they did by leaving cultivation, they would lose their means of livelihood and their families consequently would starve. Moreover, the high-caste Hindus had always despised them as untouchables and had kept them at a distance. So when India

would really become free, he argued, it would be a freedom for the privileged upper castes, the lower orders remaining deprived as they always had been. 'The day we will really feel that this is our country', Guruchand is reported to have told his disciples, 'we will lay down our lives to remove the miseries of our motherland.'⁹⁰ The words might well have been his biographer's, rather than his own; but these represent a mentality which both Guruchand and his contemporary followers might in all probability have shared. It indicates that this antipathy towards nationalism was not just a manifestation of loyalty to the British. On the contrary, it was more an expression of protest against social and economic injustices perpetrated on them by the high-caste gentry and professional classes, who had for long constituted the leadership of the struggle against the Raj. This mentality, in other words, reflected a social perception in which nationalism, for obvious reasons, appeared as elitist, leading to a consequent inclination to defy its ideological hegemony.

While Guruchand was thus trying to dissuade the Namasudra peasants from participating in the Non-Cooperation movement, at a different plane in the Legislative Council the Namasudra legislators were also expressing their distrust for the nationalists in no uncertain words. Nirod Behari Mullick, for example, declared emphatically in March 1921 that:

I know the term 'nation' in India is a misnomer . . . responsible Government . . . cannot be established until and unless there has been an all round progress of all classes . . . If there is a desire in a certain quarter to establish a premature self-government by . . . any such movement as that of non-cooperation the sooner the idea is banished from Bengal and from India the better. And on the other hand, it behoves those who are responsible for peace and tranquillity and dispensation of even handed justice to all classes to remove those weak spots, on which the flesh-flies of a handful of non-cooperators work.⁹¹

In August, both Nirod Behari and Bhishmadel Das, 'on behalf of the depressed classes of Bengal,' supported a resolution, moved by D. C. Ghose, to express their loyalty and gratitude to the King-Emperor, particularly in view of the proposed visit of the Prince of Wales in the coming winter. The two Namasudra legislators conveyed on this occasion 'the loyal and dutiful homage of the backward people of this presidency to His Majesty the King-Emperor'.⁹²

Under the influence of such leaders the Namasudra peasants not merely stayed out of the Non-cooperation movement, but in many parts

of eastern Bengal, particularly in Bakarganj, actively resisted the Congress volunteers. A meeting of the Namasudras in Bakarganj district in 1921 expressed once again their unshaken loyalty to the King-Emperor.⁹³ And when the Congress decided to organise a *hartal* (strike) on 24 December 1921, as a protest against the visit of the Prince of Wales, it was largely with the help of the Namasudras that the government tried to foil it. At Patuakhali in Bakarganj, where there was otherwise an undoubted *hartal*, the Namasudras brought in supplies to the market, in spite of stiff resistance by the Non-cooperation volunteers. At Pirojpur also, the Namasudras in great strength attended the government celebrations to hail the Prince of Wales, although the Non-cooperators did their utmost to dissuade them. In Kowkhali as well, there was no *hartal* and loyal celebrations were held with the help of the Namasudras.⁹⁴

But Bakarganj was perhaps an extreme case, where the Namasudra masses reacted actively in resistance to the Non-cooperation movement. Elsewhere the response was much more muted, being only that of indifference, which perhaps indicated a silent disapproval.⁹⁵ In general, as the government claimed in February 1922, the Namasudras did not participate in the Non-cooperation movement.⁹⁶ Then in the same month, the movement itself was withdrawn and in the Bardoli programme of social reform that followed, removal of untouchability received the first priority.⁹⁷ In Bengal, however, this evoked very little enthusiasm, as there was very little serious interest in this problem. The political elites felt frustrated and some of them did not feel shy about expressing their impatience. If endeavours to attain freedom had to wait for the implementation of the constructive programme, apprehended one of them, then there was no hope of achieving it in their life time.⁹⁸ The lingering distrust of the Namasudras and the other backward classes was therefore hardly unjustified and was highly unlikely to dissolve.

Indeed during 1921 in a series of articles in *Namasudra Hitaishi* their distrust for the Congress politicians had been expressed in no uncertain words. Those who were keen to establish *swaraj* in this country, warned one of them, must remember that their dream would not be fulfilled if the backward classes were left behind. First, work for the progress of those classes, only then *swaraj* could be attained. 'This is indeed the message of Gandhi maharaj', noted another article, but people around him paid little attention to it. 'Like the "Panchamas" of Madras', it was therefore argued, 'we must be organised as well, and through this organisation our hopes, desires, needs and grievances are to be ventilated'.⁹⁹ It was in 1917 that an All India Depressed Classes

Association had been formed and this had inspired many in Bengal as well, the Namasudras being the foremost among them. The first concrete initiative to establish such a common forum in Bengal was taken by a Paundra Kshatriya leader, Manindranath Mandal, who was from the very beginning in close contact with prominent Namasudra leaders like Mukunda Behari Mullick and Rebati Mohan Sarkar, the editor of *Namasudra Hitaishi*. His idea was to have an association which would follow the 'principles and policies' of the Muslim League. Through his initiative, a conference of all the depressed classes of Bengal was held at the City College hall in Calcutta on 5 February 1922 – ironically the same day of the Chauri Chaura incident. It was presided over by the Namasudra leader Bhishmadeb Das and was addressed among others by the two Mullick brothers, Mukunda Behari and Nirod Behari. In this conference the Bangiya Janasangha or the Bengal Peoples' Association was formed as a formal organisation of the depressed classes. It was meant to fight for their social and political rights, particularly to secure for them adequate representation in the self-governing bodies, in the legislative council and in the public services. But the new organisation, in spite of the early enthusiasm, could not really take off. Its life was cut short, as Mandal himself admitted, by the lack of committed volunteers, general apathy and mutual jealousies.¹⁰⁰ Though the depressed classes leadership at this juncture tried their best to keep the Gandhian Congress at bay, they were in problems too, because of their own disunity and the moral dilemma which Gandhi had undoubtedly created for them by prioritising the untouchability issue. For the Namasudra leadership this dilemma and disunity soon became more than apparent in their next annual conference.

In June 1922, a few months after the formal withdrawal of the Non-cooperation movement, the Bengal Namasudra Conference was held at Pirojpur, under the presidency of Rajani Kanta Das, a veteran Namasudra leader. His presidential address, which outlined a programme for mobilising the masses, was indeed a manifesto for confronting the new challenge of Gandhi and his untouchability removal programme. From time immemorial, he argued, the Namasudras had served the higher castes, but in return were despised, receiving only insults and the stigma of untouchability. Hence, they did not have any faith in whatever the higher castes did. On the other hand, it was due only to the British that after centuries of darkness, the Namasudras had received the light of civilisation, which otherwise they would remain deprived of for a few more centuries to come. They wanted to prosper further under the gracious protection of the British and hence, 'any political revolution to

replace this efficient administrative system' was against the interests of the caste. They could place very little faith in the recent untouchability removal programme announced at Bardoli. Unsuccessful as they were in obtaining *swaraj* through their own efforts, as Das analysed the situation, the high-caste leaders were now trying to woo the untouchables with such concessions. But they were yet to prove the sincerity of their intentions. If they could, so much better for the country; otherwise, the Namasudras wouldn't care to join the nationalist politics.¹⁰¹

The presidential address was not, however, only an indictment of the Gandhian Congress or an unqualified eulogy of the British. It also contained the grievances of the Namasudras, some of which were against the government as well, and a concrete socio-political programme for the future. What the Namasudras needed most, Das reiterated, was education and preferably vocational education for which there was unfortunately very little opportunity. What they wanted was for the government to spend more money on vocational training; namely, agricultural, industrial and commercial education, rather than on conventional higher education imparted by the two universities of the province, which did not serve the interests of the depressed classes. They also wanted education to be free, at least at the primary stage. Moreover, as the majority of the Namasudras were agriculturists, they wanted the government to pay more attention to the improvement of agriculture through scientific innovation and supply of better seeds and manure, and spend more money for opening at least one agricultural school in every district and a few ideal agricultural farms. There should also be, as Das emphasised, a more comprehensive legislation to determine the landlord-tenant relationship, to protect the occupancy rights of the *raiya*t and to prevent the oppressive *zamindars* from collecting illegal cesses. If possible, the tenancy legislation should be so amended as to declare the peasants the owners of the land!¹⁰²

Das's speech also contained a concrete political programme for the organisation of their movement in future and also for thwarting the Congress endeavours to cut into their support base. The recent reform act, he reminded everyone in the meeting, had provided for wider representation in the Legislative Council. Hence, the Namasudras in every district of Bengal, along with the other depressed classes, should now try to get their candidates elected to the reformed Council. To facilitate this, a voter-registration campaign might be launched and an organised movement started to persuade the Namasudra voters to vote only for their caste candidates. And like the Legislative Council, the Namasudras should also try to make their entry into District Boards,

Local Boards, and Union Boards, as only through these public platforms they could effectively ventilate their legitimate demands and grievances. In other words, Council-entry, or in fact 'capturing' the Council, he argued, was the only way to progress. The other way was to demand government services in proportion to their population; but this demand could only be aired and pressed for through the Council. To achieve all these goals, the president of the conference reminded everybody, the Namasudras should unite, eschew internal differences and work in harmony for the benefit of the entire community.¹⁰³

The presidential address thus provided an agenda for political action to rework the existing relations of power in Bengal politics and society, which the Gandhian constructive programme did not propose to accomplish. Community solidarity was regarded as an important source of strength to achieve that goal, but solidarity itself had proved to be elusive at this particular juncture. Not everyone in the conference shared the sentiments of the President, although he did represent the dominant view. The discussions in the meeting ultimately centred round two major issues, the boycott of foreign goods and social reforms, mainly widow remarriage. The heated debate that followed ultimately led to a division of the gathering, about ten to eleven thousand strong, into three warring factions. The majority, being anti-nationalist and desirous of achieving higher ritual status through Sanskritisation, were against both boycott and widow remarriage. The others were divided into two groups – one in favour of boycott but against widow remarriage and the other in favour of both. The latter party, which was the smallest, being about five hundred in number, left at the beginning of the conference, followed by the larger body of about four to five thousand, who wanted boycott but not widow-remarriage. Later both the parties returned and jointly attacked the remaining delegates and the conference ended in a pandemonium.¹⁰⁴

The next year the Namasudra conference met at Khulna and here there was no major dissidence – not because differences had been sorted out, but because the dissident elements being in a hopeless minority decided to stay away from it. It was resolved at this meeting that if the Namasudras joined the nationalists they would never be able to move up in social scale. What they needed most at that moment were education, wealth and appointment. First, they should get everything and only then the question of sacrifice might arise. The Namasudras had all respect for the concept of freedom, but they were not in a position to join the movement to achieve it.¹⁰⁵ First, they needed to secure for themselves a position of power within the political matrix of colonial India. Only then

would the question of integrating into the larger political nation arise. The Gandhian alternative, which did not address this issue of power, failed to accommodate the political aspirations of these leaders and therefore did not appeal to them, except to a small minority, who remained for all practical purposes isolated from their own community.

Meanwhile, in the Legislative Council Bhishmadeb Das remained as vocal as ever and the demands that he put forth bears further testimony to the political aspirations of the Namasudra elites at this juncture. Some of these were more general demands that concerned the depressed classes as a whole, e.g., additional steps for the spread of education among such classes and exemption for such students from the payment of examination fees, as was supposedly the practice in Madras.¹⁰⁶ His other demands were however more specific and concerned particularly the Namasudras. In August 1922 he pleaded for liberal grants for schools in certain areas of Faridpur, where the Namasudras mainly resided and where the repeated crop-failures during the last few years had adversely affected the condition of the schools.¹⁰⁷ An almost similar but more specific demand was for special provisions for the improvement of the Namasudra schools in the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur.¹⁰⁸ In addition to this, he also pointed out that the students in the Namasudra hostel in Calcutta had to pay seat rents, while such hostels in Dacca were rent-free. There was not even any provision for free medical aid in this hostel, and the students were aggrieved as they had to 'live under the superintendence of a man having not much sympathy with the Namasudra community'.¹⁰⁹ But such complaints notwithstanding, there was still, as he mentioned, a 'great demand for such hostels at other centres of education, namely at Daulatpur, Pirojpur, Gopalganj, Bagerhat, Mary Gopinathpur, Bhanga and Faridpur' – all areas principally inhabited by the Namasudras.¹¹⁰

The most important disincentive that still hindered the progress of education among the depressed classes, thought Bhishmadeb, was 'the failure of their graduates in obtaining suitable Government employment'. Hence, he tried to impress upon the government 'the desirability of reserving a certain percentage of the posts . . . for suitable candidates of the depressed classes, as . . . [had] been done in the case of Muhammadans'.¹¹¹ They legitimately deserved this patronage as they had 'not joined the non-cooperation movement'.¹¹² There were certain other practices as well, such as the recording of caste status of the witnesses in the civil courts, which tended to 'accentuate caste distinction'. Das registered his emphatic protest against them and demanded their immediate revocation.¹¹³ The government responded

very cautiously and carefully to all these complaints, as the Namasudra community, they thought, was 'very sensitive' and any adverse reply might 'create a great discontent among them'.¹¹⁴ Sympathetic consideration of their grievances as well as concrete material concessions were promised as soon as funds would be available for such purposes.

All those demands mentioned above, it is needless to point out, could benefit only the upper echelon of the Namasudra community, i.e., the educated elites. But at a time when community solidarity was the prime thing that the Namasudra leadership was seeking after, Bhishmadeb could hardly afford to ignore his 'constituency', i.e., the poor peasants of the 'depressed classes'. Hence, he also raised in the legislative council what may be described as typically some peasant demands.¹¹⁵ His eloquent advocacy of a fresh tenancy legislation to protect the interests of the *raiya*ts bear evidence of his awareness of the plight of his less fortunate caste-brothers and his urge to do something for them, at least to win their support, if not for anything else. On 7 July 1921, he moved a resolution in the Council proposing the formation of a committee which would consider and report what amendments were needed in the Bengal Tenancy Act. The amendments, he argued, were necessary because the existing legislation, in spite of the 'genuine sympathy' of its framers, was full of defects and anomalies. 'Apart from the defects', he further pointed out, 'the movement of time has rendered it necessary to give a higher and better status to the *raiya*ts.' Time had come, he reminded his audience, for the leaders of the province 'to show something more than profession of sympathy'. Because, 'if we want to save this country from the upheavals suffered in Russia and the neighbouring countries, the visionary versions of which are reaching the ears of the cultivators of our country, it is high time that we should take a bold and vigorous step to save the country from a violent convulsion'. His advocacy of the tenancy reform was thus to prevent a cataclysmic upheaval and the reason why he was speaking more for the *raiya*ts and less for the under-*raiya*ts is also understandable if we keep in mind the composition of the Namasudra community itself, with a preponderance of tenant farmers (see Chapter 1). As an evidence of cross-class co-operation and good will, Shib Sekhaheswar Ray, as a representative of the landlords of Bengal, supported the motion brought by 'the representative of [a] great community which . . . [was] mainly agricultural by occupation and constitute[d] a very large portion of . . . [the] tenancy'. The resolution was then passed in a slightly modified form.¹¹⁶

The other Namasudra member in the Council, Nirod Behari Mullick, was less eloquent, but vocal nevertheless. In July 1921, he opposed a

resolution on Calcutta University, moved by Rishindranath Sarkar, because he thought it threatened the interests of the backward classes by shutting them off from participating in the activities of the university.¹¹⁷ In the same month, he lent his powerful support to another resolution, moved by Radha Charan Pal, proposing necessary steps to mitigate the distress arising out of the prevailing scarcity in Khulna. This near-famine situation had been caused by the cyclone of October 1919 and the consequent crop failure of 1920, and had affected about 300 villages in Satkhira subdivision. Immediate relief measures, Mullick believed, were urgently needed to save the distressed people. In this connection, he appreciated the Collector of Khulna, who did everything that he could to support and assist the local Relief Committee 'at the time when the non-cooperators called the unhappy and foolish strikes which caused not only unnecessary deaths at Chandpur but also gave additional trouble to the famine-stricken people of Khulna'.¹¹⁸ This last comment once again reflected the state of mind of the Namasudra community, particularly of its leaders, and this was far more specifically spelled out by Mullick himself, during the budget discussion of 1922: 'So far as mere sweet words are concerned, I admit that from the highest rulers of the province to the so-called Leagues, everyone shows sympathy with the condition of the backward classes. But when the time for practical action comes, all sympathy evaporates. Mere sweet words count for nothing'.¹¹⁹ This was in fact a universal complaint against the high caste politicians, being voiced by almost all the leaders of the depressed classes around this time. And this was, indeed, their rallying cry against the nationalists.

But unfortunately for them, even such catchy slogans could not always mobilise the depressed classes peasantry, particularly when it was a question of organising for modern institutional politics. Its intricacies, which the leadership was very much interested in, had little attraction for the less educated masses. This became evident once again when the Namasudra peasants failed to rally round their leaders at the time of the election of 1923. It showed that organising a social campaign or sending deputations were certainly different from mobilising an illiterate and less politicised electorate on the election day. Moreover, in this technique of modern institutional politics the Namasudra leaders were both ill-prepared and less efficient. Their short-comings were made much more glaring as the Swarajya Party, under the leadership of a seasoned politician C.R. Das, was now back in the battle. The Swarajists did not 'ignore' the backward classes;¹²⁰ their most notable gain was the support of two important leaders of two such communities – the Namasudra leader Mohini Mohan Das of Dacca, who became a close associate of C.R. Das,

playing an important role in subsequent Council politics, and Hem Chandra Naskar, the leader of the Paundra-Kshatriya community of the twenty-four-Parganas.¹²¹ The final switching over of Mohini Mohan to the nationalist camp formalised the division within the rank of the Namasudra leadership that had made itself evident at Pirojpur Conference a year earlier. It further came to a head in the triangular electoral fight in the Faridpur South constituency in 1923. Bhishmadeb Das, in this constituency, represented the traditional leadership of the Namasudras centred at Orakandi; Mukunda Behari Mullick represented the new Bengal Namasudra Association and Mohini Mohan Das, who had by now severed his connections with the Association, stood for the Swarajya Party. There were two other caste Hindu candidates, one of them being a relative of C.R. Das himself.¹²² But as the polling results show, they were more or less inconsequential figures. So it was really a triangular contest, out of which Mohini Mohan came out victorious with a clear mandate. He had 59.26 per cent of the total votes cast, as against 32.62 per cent in favour of Bhishmadeb and a paltry 7.15 per cent in favour of Mukunda Behari. And this victory was despite the fact that this constituency was the main seat of the Namasudra social movement and Mohini Mohan had no local roots here, as he was himself a resident of Dacca.¹²³

Mukunda Behari, however, did better in his home ground, the Khulna constituency, where he polled 22.08 per cent of the votes actually cast, as against 53.14 per cent cast in favour of Sailaja Nath Ray Choudhuri, the victorious caste Hindu candidate. Nirod Behari Mullick was more successful in Bakarganj South, where he polled 41.84 per cent of the votes actually cast; he was however, defeated by Satyendra Nath Ray Choudhuri, a caste Hindu candidate, who had the support of 57.08 per cent of the voters actually exercising their franchise. Two other Namasudra candidates met with an almost similar fate. In Bakarganj North, Keshab Chandra Das who had in his favour 15.90 per cent of the votes polled, lost to Nishit Chandra Sen who got 63.06 per cent. In Faridpur North, Broja Mohan Mandal with 24.23 per cent of votes polled going in his favour, lost to Kumud Sankar Roy Choudhuri who had polled 44.81 per cent of the votes. The other defeated Namasudra candidates were Debendranath Biswas, Suresh Chandra Adhikari and Rajanikanta Das in Jessore South, Jessore North and Dacca constituencies respectively. Thus in 1923, all the Namasudra candidates, despite their caste ties with the majority of the voters and the recently aroused caste sentiments, lost election to high-caste *bhadralok* candidates. And this time, Charu Chandra Das, a non-Namasudra, was nominated to represent the depressed classes in the Bengal Legislative Council.¹²⁴

The key factor that explains this Namasudra electoral débâcle was perhaps the low polling average which did not reach 50 per cent of the total electorate in any of these constituencies; in Khulna, it was 45.47 per cent, in Faridpur South 36.85 per cent, Faridpur North 46.09 per cent, Bakarganj South 46.91 per cent and Bakarganj North 33.95 per cent.¹²⁵ This shows that the average voters were not sufficiently aware of the significance of election or of the complexities of electoral politics. As a result, the Namasudra leadership, sharply divided as it was by now, could not mobilise them on the election day. Had they been able to do this, and if the leaders were united, the election results might have been different. The results clearly suggests that the unique solidarity among the different sections of the Namasudras, which had been achieved to a large extent during the days of the *Swadeshi* movement, was now showing signs of strain, and indeed started to crumble from this point onwards.

IV

But the low voters' turnout on the election day did not imply that the community consciousness of the Namasudra peasantry had been eroded or their continuing alienation from nationalist politics had been broken. Only, when their leaders remained more embroiled in institutional politics did this community consciousness and sense of alienation at the grassroots level find an altogether different expression. For the first time in 1921 the Namasudras and the Muslims were in opposite political camps. While the former remained alienated from nationalist politics, the latter under the influence of the Khilafatist preachers, joined the Non-cooperation movement. Interestingly, this led to a friction which resulted in communal riots and tension that lasted for about four years in southern Faridpur and the adjoining regions of the neighbouring districts.

The relations between the two communities had always been tense in the southern parts of Faridpur. There was always a strong under-current of ill-feeling and whenever petty incidents occurred between individuals, large numbers on both sides would be ready to vindicate the honour of their respective communities.¹²⁶ They were seriously agitated during the convulsions of 1911 in Jessore-Khulna. Two years later in 1913, a dispute culminated in violence at Silna, a market place near Gopalganj. In the same year there was also a disturbance at Tarail in Kasiani police station.¹²⁷ And then during the Non-cooperation movement a political dimension was added to this already embittered relationship. The

Muslims under the influence of Khilafat leaders like Badsha Mia, and the preachings of the local fire-brand Dr Abdul Wahab, took up a hostile attitude towards the British Government. 'The Namasudras on the contrary', observed the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) of Gopalganj, 'under the influence of Christian Missionaries and the preachings of Guru Charan Thakur . . . remained loyal'. In such a situation, trouble arose at Bathandanga *hat* (local market) where the Muslim *ijaradars* prohibited the sale of foreign clothes. The Namasudras, who insisted on dealing in foreign articles, were insulted and were called *Chanral*. They, in retaliation started a *hat* of their own at Padmabila. This rival *hat* brought about a partial collapse of the old one and the Muslim *ijaradars*, who could not pay their rents, were saddled with decrees and costs. This embittered the communal feelings still further, the Muslims now simply waiting for a fitting occasion to take their revenge. In 1922 they seized over a hundred heads of cattle belonging to the Namasudras and the Sub-Inspector of Kasiani *thana* had to intervene to procure their release. A few days later, over a petty dispute at a village called Distile, there was again a serious riot between the two communities ending in bloodshed and one murder.¹²⁸ Nothing further happened for the time being; but the lull was only a preparatory intermission before the more serious outbreak of violence in May 1923.

In the meantime, the communal feelings had been further intensified by the orthodox Khilafat leaders. By the middle of 1923, the Khilafat party had ceased to be a separate force in Bengal politics. But the movement was kept alive by a number of irreconcilables who were relying more and more on the anti-Hindu propaganda to secure the support of their community. As a result, communal tension had been rising in different parts of Bengal.¹²⁹ In Faridpur, the already existing under-current of ill-feeling erupted into a widespread violent riot in May 1923 over two petty disputes that took place in village Sripur, within two miles of village Padmabila, where the Namasudras had started their rival *hat* during the days of Non-cooperation. The first was a quarrel between a Namasudra boy and some Muslim boys, which caused some exchanges of abuse and threats, but no actual violence was used. But a few days later on 10 May, some cattle owned by the Namasudras strayed into the paddy field of two Muslims of Sripur. The cattle were seized by the latter, but were rescued by the Namasudras, and four or five of them were injured in the scuffle that followed. The Assistant Sub-Inspector of Kasiani Police Station rushed to the spot and amicably settled the matter. The Namasudras regarded this encounter as a 'defeat' for their community and made preparations for retribution.¹³⁰

In the morning of 13 May, large numbers assembled on both sides at villages Padmabila and Goalgram. The former was inhabited by the Namasudras, while the contiguous village Goalgram was inhabited by the Muslims. But supporters armed with spears and other weapons streamed in from all quarters, until at least two thousand men assembled on either side, facing each other in two long files in an open ground between the two villages. The Sub-Inspector of Kasiani immediately rushed to the spot with a small contingent of five men and only two guns. Although he succeeded in preventing the actual outbreak of violence by firing two shots, he failed to persuade either party to yield an inch of ground, as each insisted that the other should retire first. However, towards the evening, both the parties retired to their respective villages, the Muslims to break their *Roja* fast. The fact that the Namasudras did not try to take advantage of this situation evokes surprise and leads one to suspect that there was no real intention to fight, but just to have a show of strength to uphold the honour of their community.¹³¹

Next morning (14 May) both the parties assembled again in still stronger numbers, reinforcements having arrived from villages all round the countryside. The Namasudras numbered around three and a half thousand and the Muslims not less than two and a half thousand. The Sub-Inspector did his utmost to persuade the *matbars* on both sides to keep their men in their respective villages. But the Namasudras refused to listen and on one occasion actually threatened the Sub-Inspector for snatching the spear from one of them and compelled him to return it.¹³² His efforts to prevent fighting by taking recourse to intermittent firing was successful until midday, when attacks and counter-attacks commenced. The fighting that lasted for about an hour was not hand to hand, but consisted of rushes and throwing of spears and clods. The mob dispersed gradually after about thirteen hours, taking away all injured and dead. One Muslim was reported to be killed and two others injured. There was, however, no death or injury among the Namasudras. It was, after all, their 'victory'.¹³³

Late at night, an additional police force arrived on the spot and the next day (15 May), the SDO himself came to the troubled area. Although in the morning the Muslims once again started gathering at Kumaria, a village about one mile south of Padmabila, no further untoward incident occurred. Meanwhile police enquiries and searches continued. On the fourth day (16 May) the District Magistrate of Faridpur along with the Superintendent of Police reached Jalilpur on their way to Padmabila and were received by the local inhabitants with a sense of relief. There was some fresh tension on 18 May, as information

arrived that about four thousand Muslims had assembled at village Dharinda, about six miles east of Padmabila, in order to attack the Namasudra villages. The District Magistrate at once rushed to the spot and persuaded them to disperse. Excitement began to die down hereafter and the better elements in the population became anxious to see peace and order restored.¹³⁴ Police enquiries, however, continued and they revealed that actually two Muslims were killed and several others were injured. There was still no evidence of any Namasudra being killed or even wounded. Up to the end of May, 124 persons were arrested, of them eighty-two were Namasudras and forty-two Muslims, while 245 were still absconding.¹³⁵

The riot of 1923, which in many ways resembled that of 1911, indicates certain important features of community relations in rural Bengal. The similarity between the two situations was most striking in respect to mobilisation. Message for help travelled as quickly as before and the people on both sides assembled with the same rapidity and from an almost equally wide region. The Namasudras were said to have come across the river Madhumati from Jessore and the Muslims from far distant places to the north of *thana* Muksudpur and even from *thana* Bhanga, many miles further off to the north.¹³⁶ In this mobilisation there was no religious dispute involved, nor was there any overt use of religious symbols. But there were dissimilarities too. First of all, there was no actual looting or arson, although the fear of this was considerable. This perhaps implies that neither side was really intent on mischief and the whole incident was based on mutual distrust and the urge to stand forth to protect the honour of the community. This becomes further evident from the warm reception given to the police force when it appeared in the troubled area and the confidence its presence inspired in the minds of the local inhabitants. As the District Magistrate reported, the Namasudras were exceedingly glad to see the armed force passing through their villages and their women turned out and gave *uloo* (a form of greeting) to the force as it passed along and in some areas even offered them *muri* (puffed rice) by way of refreshment. Neither did the combatants themselves resent the appearance of police, as each party thought that it would deter the other from attacking them. Another significant dissimilarity with the 1911 situation, which indeed reflected a general change in the nature of community composition among the Namasudras, was the separation between the peasants and the elites, who scrupulously maintained their distance from the rioting mob. All the 'intelligent members of both the communities', reported the District Magistrate of Faridpur, were on the side of law and order, as they were particularly

apprehensive of the prospect of the outsiders coming in from Jessore and Bhanga. But as before, the political leaders of the two communities could hardly let the matter go unattended. So Bhishmadeb Das and Khan Bahadur Rahamatjan Choudhuri, the two local MLCs (Member of Legislative Council) representing the two communities, rushed to the spot and exerted their influence over their respective peoples. The threat of posting punitive police in the locality also had a salutary effect. The situation as a result could promptly be brought under control.¹³⁷

But although rioting ended through the intervention of the elites, the mutual distrust between the two peasant communities continued. Generally, the Namasudras would try to avoid passing through a Muslim village and the Muslims through a Namasudra village, for fear of attack.¹³⁸ The local officials could hardly wish away the possibility of a recurrence of further communal violence. Since all the casualties during the May riot were among the Muslims, reported the SDO, Gopalganj, in September, 'a bitter feeling of racial animosity . . . [was] rankling in the hearts of Muhammadans of this Sub-division and surrounding Sub-divisions'. There was also a strong rumour that the Muslims had planned to attack the Namasudras, particularly those of village Orakandi, on the next *Sankranti* day (last day) of the month of Bhadra, i.e., 17 September.¹³⁹ Although the rumour turned out to be false, it was not without grounds. As the SDO, Gopalganj, later explained:

Orakandi forms the centre of the Namasudra world and it is generally believed that all movements originate from Orakandi, the home of Guru Charan Thakur and Babu Bhishmadeb Das. The Muhammadans rightly or wrongly believe that but for the assistance of the Orakandi people other Namasudras cannot move a step . . . The people of Orakandi naturally placed reliance on rumours that it was easy for the Muhammadans to arrange a general attack on the Namasudras on the occasion of the general boat races [on the *sankranti* day].¹⁴⁰

The riots, as the officials suspected, might not have been wholly unconnected with the broader social movement among the Namasudras. It was indeed from this movement that the Namasudra peasantry had derived their sense of community honour. Then, particularly at a later stage, there were also attempts to establish a direct connection, as the biographer of Guruchand proudly speaks of the *guru's* active involvement in the Padmabila riot.¹⁴¹ It was therefore not very unnatural for the Muslims, in their bid for revenge, to strike at the centre, or indeed the very symbol, of the Namasudra movement, by attacking Orakandi.

All attempts at mutual settlement, therefore, failed and tension prevailed over a wide region. Preparations for attacks and counter-attacks continued, as rumours were constantly afloat and provocation not certainly lacking.¹⁴² By September, the excitement spilled over to the neighbouring district of Jessore where a violent flare up was only averted by constant police vigilance.¹⁴³ And next year, tension mounted again around March–April, when four incidents were reported at short intervals from southern Faridpur.¹⁴⁴

These incidents only revealed that there was still a strong undercurrent of asperity between the two peasant communities and any trivial dispute could develop into a serious affair within a short while. The situation forced the government to think about posting punitive police. The proposal itself had a significant deterrent effect on both the communities; but more significantly, what followed after its announcement revealed once again the complex interrelationship between these two people and the colonial state. A peace meeting was held at Orakandi on 2 May 1924. It was largely attended by the Muslims and the Namasudras, who 'deeply lamented' their 'past conduct' and assured the government, that in future no such occurrence was likely to recur. 'The masses of both the two communities,' they reminded, 'are illiterate cultivators but they are the most law-abiding and submissive of people.' So, if in order to deal with these 'ever loyal' subjects, the government now took recourse to 'the repression of extraordinary Police', 'the poor cultivators . . . [would] be utterly ruined.'¹⁴⁵ On 9 May, on behalf of the Muslims and Namasudras of ninety villages of Faridpur, the president of the meeting, Muktar Abdul Kader (who was the Secretary of the Gopalganj Anjuman) sent an urgent telegram to the Chief Secretary, 'expressing love and respect for Emperor and constitution' and requesting him 'to desist from contemplated punitive measures.'¹⁴⁶ The proposal of punitive police was dropped thereupon.¹⁴⁷

The tension, however, did not subside, although there was no outward display of animosity. The situation continued until April–May 1925, when there were again a few incidents between the two communities in Gopalganj and Kotalipara police stations in Faridpur.¹⁴⁸ This persistence of communal tension, once again impelled the police authorities to think of punitive police as 'men's pockets', they thought, were the most 'vulnerable spots'.¹⁴⁹ But the civil administration opposed the measure, possibly due to political reasons. 'There has been no trouble at all since May 1925,' wrote the District Magistrate of Faridpur in August, 'and I think that it would be almost asking for such trouble' if the idea of posting additional police was now revived.¹⁵⁰ The Divisional

Commissioner of Dacca also argued that the cultivators of the Gopalganj subdivision had already been impoverished in recent years by floods and cattle diseases. In such a situation, 'the collection of the cost of additional police is likely to cause hardship and discontent'.¹⁵¹ But even while these talks were going on, another riot was threatened at Tarail in Kasiani police station, over a petty quarrel.¹⁵² But the government chose to ignore it as 'a trivial incident'. 'I do not think', noted the Chief Secretary on 9 October, 'that we can reasonably have additional police until they have another big flare up'. He could hardly deny though that 'additional police would have a wholesome effect'.¹⁵³

The question therefore is: why was the government so hesitant? The answer perhaps lies in the political situation of 1925–26. The present series of riots were initially caused by the political differences between the two communities regarding the boycott of foreign goods, although in time the original issue was forgotten and the 'honour' of the community loomed larger. In the meantime, the Khilafat movement had also died down, and the two peasant communities were again coming closer, if not in Faridpur, then definitely in other surrounding districts, against the Hindu *bhadralok* and their nationalist agitation. In Narail subdivision of Jessore the Muslim and Namasudra sharecroppers had already combined again under the leadership of Nausher Ali to demand two-thirds share of the produce from their caste Hindu *jotedars*. The movement which continued for greater part of 1924–25 was dubbed by the Congress as communal and was repressed ultimately by the police.¹⁵⁴ In March 1925, the Magistrate of Bakarganj reported that while the Hindu *bhadralok* were still opposed to the formation of Union Boards, the Namasudras and Muslims were very much in favour of them. A similar report was also received from Chittagong.¹⁵⁵ In July 1926, the *Barishal Hitaishi* came out with an almost hysterical remark about an unholy alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras: 'From the speeches delivered in the various mass meetings held at different places either jointly by the Muhammadans and the Namasudras or by the Muhammadans alone, it is apparent that the Namasudras and the Muhammadans are uniting against the upper classes.'¹⁵⁶ The year 1926 was particularly marred by Hindu-Muslim communal violence, in which the Hindus expected to have the Namasudras on their side. An election was also imminent and therefore it was imperative on the part of the nationalists that they should try more seriously to break the continuing alienation of the Namasudras. The whole situation, therefore, demanded a more cautious handling by the government – and by the nationalists, too. For both, the support of the Namasudras, and also of the Muslims – was crucial. The

former needed this support to legitimise its rule over a colonised people, the latter to strengthen its claim to represent the emergent nation.

Chapter 5

Constitutional Politics and a Fissured Community, 1925–1937

From the middle of the 1920s a series of significant events took place in the organised politics of India, Bengal included. These events were the communal tension and the election of 1926, the two phases of a Gandhian movement involving mass civil disobedience, some major developments in the making of a future constitution for India, such as the three sessions of the Round Table Conference, Communal Award, Poona Pact and the Government of India Act of 1935, providing for reserved seats for the Scheduled Castes (or the former Depressed Classes), and what followed thereafter, i.e., the election and the ministry formation of 1937. These momentous changes had shaken the whole structure of Bengal politics and the different groups of Namasudras in different ways went on responding, reacting and adjusting themselves continually to this changing political scenario. Their movement also began to show more signs of strains, it was deeply engrossed in constitutional politics and to some extent also involved in faction fighting, and the leaders had little time for the masses. Nevertheless, they all – the leaders as well as the masses – remained, during this period, alienated from mainstream nationalism, despite renewed efforts to integrate them into the broader Hindu society. This alienation though, once again, had different expressions and varied orientations.

In the days of high communal tension, following the breakdown of C. R. Das's Bengal Pact,¹ the necessity to integrate the lower castes into the main body of Hindu society was much more acutely felt. More so as the Muslims and the Namasudras were once again coming closer in different parts of eastern Bengal. Such a reunion to oppose *bhadralok* politics in Bakarganj, as mentioned earlier, had already created a panic. Leaders like Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, who had connections with both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress, therefore began to argue in public lectures that untouchability was one of the main reasons behind the

downfall of India and this had to be eradicated for her future liberation.² At a meeting in April 1926 in Mymensingh, attended by 'two hundred Namasudras', he urged them to fight for their own freedom through 'boycott' of the higher castes. But under no circumstances should they join hands with the non-Hindus or ask for favour from the foreign rulers.³ A similar sentiment had also been expressed earlier, in the presence of Gandhi himself, by the noted Hindu scientist Prafulla Chandra Ray. In his presidential speech at the Provincial Hindu Conference at Faridpur in 1925, he cautioned the Hindus, echoing U. N. Mukherji's arguments from *A Dying Race*, that they were losing in numbers to the Muslims, and the root cause of this was untouchability, which was encouraging conversion. Untouchability was also the main reason for India's subjection to a foreign power. Hence it was to be removed: water had to be accepted from all these castes.⁴

These twin concerns about untouchability, causing a depletion of Hindu numerical strength *vis-à-vis* the Muslims and contributing to foreign subjection, had indeed become prominent elements of a continuing public discourse in Bengal during the latter half of the 1920s.⁵ A series of articles in *Bangabani*, for example, argued consistently for years that political struggle for independence, unless accompanied by social reforms like removal of untouchability, was doomed to failure.⁶ At a more organised level, the Hindu Mahasabha now more fervently tried to enhance Hindu solidarity by preaching the abolition of untouchability and seeking to mobilise the lower caste masses in a possible combination against an imagined Muslim challenge. But fraught with contradictions and ambiguity, such efforts hardly evoked any response from their actual target population, the alienated depressed classes.⁷ It was no wonder, therefore, that in areas like Faridpur the Namasudras would still feel tempted to join hands with their Muslim brethren to organise a social boycott of the high caste Hindus during the *pujas* of 1926.⁸

The local Congress was also trying assiduously to cultivate the friendship of the depressed classes, as in an atmosphere of communal tension, such people had suddenly become politically very important. In 1926 at the Khulna district conference, the Congress volunteers ceremonially accepted food and water from the hands of the depressed Paundra Kshatriya caste. Around the same time, at a Namasudra meeting at Mohiniganj in Pabna, the Brahmans and Kayasthas present there did the same.⁹ But such ceremonial acts apart, the Congress now had the untouchability removal programme more prominently placed in its agenda, and as a depressed classes leader himself tells us, this had evoked tremendous interest and optimism among such people.¹⁰ Torn by

faction fighting and internal tension, however, the party could not take advantage of the situation. Gandhi came to Bengal in 1924 as a mediator between the two warring factions in the provincial Congress and in a number of meetings preached his three-point programme of *khadi*, Hindu-Muslim unity and the abolition of untouchability. But, as a government report complacently records, 'his preaching left his audiences cold', and his open preference for C. R. Das alienated the other 'no-changer' group,¹¹ which indeed was more interested in his constructive programme.

Das's Swaraj Party, on the other hand, was so deeply involved in Council politics that it had no time for an untouchability removal campaign. Nor could they ignore the issue altogether, so decided to handle it in their own way, i.e., by bringing it on to the floor of the Council, with Dr Mohini Mohan Das, Chittaranjan's most valuable recruit from among the Namasudras, now taking the floor. The students of the depressed classes, Mohini Mohan reminded the government, were not allowed to reside in hostels attached to schools and colleges in Bengal. Hence, such provisions had to be made, as seats were to be reserved for them in the Dacca Medical School.¹² In the budget session of 1925 he further demanded two lakhs of rupees to be earmarked in the Education Budget for the primary education of the depressed classes. The utter lack of education and the resultant inertia of these poor millions, he argued, had created 'an obstruction in the path of Swaraj'. An amended version of his resolution was later accepted by the House.¹³

Apart from raising such occasional Council questions or sponsoring resolutions, the Swarajists did precious little to mobilise the masses. The Congress now became detached from the people and therefore, as the *Bengalee* noted with alarm in 1926, became vulnerable to the 'slightest organised opposition'.¹⁴ The Indian National Congress, the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* complained in 1927, had always ignored the colossal strength of the masses. It was no wonder therefore that the campaign for *swaraj*, like the endeavours of a bewildered traveller in the desert, was going to end nowhere.¹⁵ This utter neglect of the peoples' cause by the Swarajists became more evident when the Bengal Tenancy Bill came up for debate in the Council in August 1928. The voting pattern on the various amendments to the Bill made it quite clear that while the Muslims and the members of depressed classes, like the Namasudra leader Rebati Mohan Sarkar and the Rajbansi leader Nagendra Narayan Ray, voted for the rights of the sharecroppers, under-tenants and tenants against those of the landlords, the Swarajya Party leaders voted consistently in favour of landlord interest, allowing in the end the

original Bill to be passed intact.¹⁶ 'It was not fortuitous', therefore, as one historian of Indian peasantry notes, 'that Muslims and Namasudras who worked as tenants on landlords' fields were being alienated from the Congress'.¹⁷ Their opposition to the Primary (Rural) Education Bill in 1929-30 finally destroyed the credibility of these Hindu nationalists in the eyes of the depressed classes.¹⁸

While the peasants remained alienated, the Swarajya Party did not offer anything to accommodate the aspirations of the socially mobile Namasudra middle class. The latter as a result continued to look for patronage to the British who seemed always to be ready with helping hands. As an official noted in 1928, 'the class feelings of the Namasudras in Faridpur and Barisal have been more and more awakened and they have been, and are, putting forward repeated demands for improved means of education amongst their community and for more posts in the administration'.¹⁹ A deputation led by Mukunda Behari Mullick had already met Lord Lytton with such demands, and was assured that 'no qualified candidate of . . . [their] community will ever be passed over on the ground of his caste'. Another deputation met the Governor of Bengal, Sir Stanley Jackson and received a similar reassuring reply.²⁰ Meanwhile, the education department continued to receive scores of petitions from various other Namasudra organisations which all asked for a variety of concessions. To mention a few, the Kanchrapara Namasudra Udbodhani Samiti asked for reservation of seats in medical, engineering and other institutions of Bengal.²¹ The Orakandi Namasudra Samiti requested for the appointment of a Namasudra Subdivisional Inspector of Schools in the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district, for, such an officer would be more sympathetic to the needs of their community.²² Then in early 1926 a Namasudra conference at Jessore demanded more facilities for elementary education; a similar conference at Barisal asked for the introduction of compulsory primary education.²³ In March 1927 the Orakandi association sent another long petition to the education minister asking for educational concessions on the ground that they constituted 'one of the most important elements of the backward classes in Bengal'.²⁴ The association was informed that many of their demands had already been met, and many others would be accommodated in a comprehensive Primary Education Bill which was then under consideration.²⁵

But even before that, the Government often went out of its way to offer special concessions to the Namasudras to patronise their endeavours for social upliftment. To give a few examples, in 1926 the Collector of Bakarganj was given special funds for distribution among

the Namasudra schools in the district.²⁶ In 1927 in Pirojpur, the government, overriding the existing rules, sanctioned a special fund to meet the medical expenses of the boarders at the local Namasudra hostel.²⁷ The following year, a new hostel was started for the Namasudra boys studying at the Patuakhali High English School, while the existing grants for similar hostels at Dacca and Calcutta were continued.²⁸ In 1929 a special grant was sanctioned to the primary school for the Namasudras in Kagmari in the district of Jessore.²⁹ In October 1930, the DPI argued that though in Dacca division the Namasudras had shown 'a keen desire for education and commendable enterprise in building up schools', the limited number of free studentships had been unduly depleting their student rolls. He therefore pleaded for 'additional free places up to an annual limit of 15 percent of their own enrolment'. When the finance department raised the question of loss of revenue, he pointed out that 'there is such a thing as *political exigency* also'.³⁰ The proposal was therefore sanctioned in April 1932.³¹

This many concessions to one particular community, many of them at the grassroots level, very naturally aroused the envy of the other groups located in similar socio-economic situation. This sense of dissatisfaction could easily be detected in the vitriolic speeches of Charu Chandra Das, the non-Namasudra nominated representative of the depressed classes in the Bengal legislature. In 1925 when Mohini Mohan Das was asking for two lakhs of rupees for the primary education of the depressed classes, Charu Chandra demanded the amount sanctioned to be 'equitably distributed amongst the several sections of the community'. For, there was 'a class of the depressed people styled Namasudras', he warned the Council. The Christian Missionaries were always with them and through 'their influence and owing to the preponderance of the number of this class and the consequent concentration of efforts, they generally catch the eye of the government whenever the existing privileges come to be distributed amongst the backward classes'. The other depressed groups, though even worse off, were 'generally neglected for their inability to make themselves heard'.³² The crucial point therefore was the success of the Namasudras in making themselves heard, as a result of which they were surging ahead of the other depressed sections of the society and their public audibility increased continually – a point that needs explanation.

In 1930, at a meeting at Khulna Sadar town, Guruchand Thakur in his presidential address emphasised that the emancipation of the lower castes and the untouchables would never be accomplished unless and until they had a share of the political power devolved recently to the

Indian people through successive constitutional reforms.³³ Indeed since 1929–30, the Namasudras, more than any other section of the depressed classes, used such public fora as the Legislative Council or the District and Union Boards to voice their demands. Because of the active and constant countenance they received from the government, they were now relatively more successful in this than they had been in the early 1920s. This official assistance was necessary as the high-caste *bhadralok* politicians continued to exclude them from power. In the Council election of 1926, for example, none of the Namasudra candidates, including such prominent leaders as Mukunda Behari Mullick and Bhishmadeb Das, could get through. The only representation they had was through the nominated member Rai Sahib Rebati Mohan Sarkar, whose entry into the Council was due entirely to the patronage of the government. The same story was repeated again in 1929, when the only Namasudra candidate elected to the legislative council was the Swarajist, Dr Mohini Mohan Das – the only one of his community so far offered a Swarajya Party ticket. But the government, on the other hand, was more generous this time, nominating, in violation of the existing convention, two Namasudras, Rebati Mohan Sarkar and Mukunda Behari Mullick. In 1930, however, the Swarajists came out of the Council and in the bye-election that followed, boycotted by the Congress, three more Namasudras were elected without contest. They were Amulyadhan Ray from Jessore, Lalit Kumar Bal from Bakarganj and Sarat Chandra Bal from Faridpur.³⁴

Thus in 1930, among ten representatives of the depressed classes (eight elected; two nominated) in the Bengal legislature, five were Namasudras. The situation indicated beyond doubt that this particular caste was most active politically and concessions given to depressed classes in general were likely to be monopolised by them. For this reason the Bengal government in its recommendations to the Indian Franchise Committee opposed the idea of granting separate electorate to the depressed classes in this province.³⁵ But it was also true that all the districts, where more than 50 per cent of the population belonged to the depressed classes, still returned only caste Hindu candidates. The situation had somewhat improved in 1930 in Bakarganj, Faridpur and Jessore, as one of the two elected candidates from each of these districts belonged to the Namasudra community. This was, however, something of an illusion – a temporary phenomenon – created by the Congress boycott of the election. The Reforms Officer for Bengal, therefore, showed no hesitation in recommending a special constituency for these people,³⁶ as was later envisaged also in the Communal Award. This

could not be granted as the issue created a great furore in national politics – which we will revisit shortly.

It is necessary to mention that though not very successful at the provincial level, the Namasudras, by virtue of their numerical superiority, were gaining larger representation at the local level in the elected self-governing bodies. In Faridpur, for example, around 1928, there were four Namasudra members in the Gopalganj Local Board. Their representation in the Union Boards was also 'considerable', although they were still unrepresented in the District Board or the municipalities.³⁷ But in Bakarganj they were represented, both through election and nomination, at all the levels, i.e., Municipalities, District Board, Local Boards and Union Boards.³⁸ In Jessore also there were Namasudra representatives in the District Board, some of the Local Boards and in several Union Boards.³⁹ In neighbouring Khulna, there were a few Namasudra Municipal Commissioners, although there was none from among them on the District Board. Their representation in the Local Boards was also meagre; but they were substantially represented in the Union Boards, some of which under Namasudra Presidents being almost dominated by them.⁴⁰ And if in other districts they failed to secure adequate representation in proportion to their numbers, it was, as diagnosed by the Collector of Dacca, only due to a lack of 'instinct for organisation which would enable them to make their numbers felt'.⁴¹ Guruchand, as we learn from his biographer, often used to tell his disciples that the Namasudras though strong in numbers were not respected by anybody as they lacked power.⁴² The reports of the various district officers in 1928–29 however, indicate that at least in districts where numerically they were preponderate, they came close to acquiring power. This limited sharing of power at the local level made the Namasudra leaders more ambitious about engineering the extension of their spheres of political influence, i.e., sharing power at broader provincial and national levels.

The depressed classes had by now emerged as an organised political group at a national level, and a number of prominent Namasudra leaders from Bengal had been taking active part in the activities of their national association born in 1917. After the failure of the 1922 experiment, initiated by a Paundra-Kshatriya leader, to create some kind of a provincial organisation of the Bengal depressed classes, the idea was revived again in 1926. This time, at a conference at Kanchrapara a Bengal Depressed Classes Association was formed with Mukunda Behari Mullick as its President. The new organisation remained closely tied to the Bengal Namasudra Association, both being headed by Mullick. In

the same year in an All India Depressed Classes' conference held at Delhi, Bengal was represented by three young Namasudra leaders, Birat Chandra Mandal, Bhishmadeb Das and Dhananjay Ray, while Mandal presided over the next year's conference held at Victoria Hall in Madras. By 1928 the Bengal Namasudra Association set up 22 district units and to co-ordinate their activities, at a conference at Faridpur in the same year a formal constitution was adopted. In 1929 the organisation was accorded official recognition, after a delegation headed by its secretary Bharat Chandra Sarkar met Sir Stanley Jackson. The same year an All Bengal Namasudra Conference was held under the presidency of Birat Mandal, who became in 1930 Bengal's representative on the Executive Committee of the national association of the depressed classes.⁴³ The situation indicates that the Namasudra leaders had come to the forefront of the Bengal depressed classes movement and had become the link between their provincial and national representative bodies, acquiring in the process immense importance in the organised politics of Bengal. It was no wonder therefore that when the Indian Statutory Commission visited India, the Bengal depressed classes were represented chiefly by the Namasudras⁴⁴ and the memorandum which their association submitted, described this particular community as 'the most prominent class among them'.⁴⁵ But at this stage a different question may perhaps be asked: what was really there in the agenda of these representatives of the depressed classes?

'These suppressed classes', said the petition of the Bengal Depressed Classes Association to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1928, 'prefer[red] British rule to Home rule for India'.⁴⁶ For they looked at British government, said the All-Bengal Namasudra Association in a written statement, 'not only as our protector but also as the God-sent deliverers of our misery'. And this deliverance was expected to come through universal adult male franchise without any property or financial qualification.⁴⁷ But this universalist approach had its limits too, for, in a political environment dominated by the ideology of community, representativeness was also a function of being and remaining a member of the community.⁴⁸ In other words, a community could only be represented by someone of that group, for no one else could be relied upon. The memorandum of the All Bengal Namasudra Association therefore argued: 'The Hindu does not indicate any homogeneous race. There is hardly any community of interest between one caste and another . . . The interest of this community [Namasudras] can never be represented by another caste, as the interests are of conflicting nature.' So what was also necessary was separate electorate: 'every community

should be given a definite number of representatives in the legislative bodies . . . in proportion to the population of each'.⁴⁹

But the same principle of representation was not to be extended to all social spheres. In particular, it was not to be applied to gender, for what was being asked for in all these constitutional memoranda was only male suffrage, because it would 'take a long time yet to make the females of the Namasudra community . . . understand their true position in respect to the political administration of the country.'⁵⁰ It was 'because of the illiteracy and the religious superstition, and all that', argued Mukunda Behari Mullick in his oral evidence, that 'Our womenfolk would not be prepared to go to the polling booth.'⁵¹ Hence 'for years to come',⁵² they were to be represented by their menfolk, notwithstanding the fact that the higher castes were using the same argument, that of illiteracy and superstitiousness of the indolent Namasudra peasantry, to deprive the community as a whole of their right to represent themselves. The asymmetric relations of power, it thus seems, were reproduced at many levels; the lower stratum of the society not excluded. Like women, the peasants were also excluded from the agenda of these Namasudra leaders. Their other demands included representation in the central and provincial Executive Councils, a fare share of the administrative services and free and compulsory elementary education⁵³ – only the last one could be of any remote interest to the poor peasants.

The submissions of the Namasudra leaders before the Simon Commission thus amply reveal their ideological retrogression, at least as far as the gender question was concerned (as opposed to the early liberalism generated by the Matua religious fervour described in Chapter 2), and their near total amnesia regarding the peasants. These attitudes were also reflected in Namasudra public meetings, held around this period under the chairmanship of Mukunda Behari Mullick. For example, at the Khulna District Namasudra conference in April 1929, attended by about three thousand people, only one speaker out of twelve, deliberating for two full days, made a brief reference to the tenancy legislation.⁵⁴ Nothing could be more indicative of the low priority that peasant issues were now assigned in the political agenda of the Namasudra leaders. This was unmistakably the beginning of the parting of the ways of the Namasudra leaders and their peasant followers. Although the *Bengal Administrative Report* triumphantly recorded the 'open opposition' of the Faridpur Namasudras to the *hartal* organised by the nationalists to mark the arrival of the Simon Commission,⁵⁵ it is difficult to say how far it was due to their allegiance to caste leaders or deference to colonial rulers or the lingering alienation from nationalist

politics – the last possibility, however, is strongly indicated by the other events of this period.

II

Indeed, the Namasudra peasants during this period were continuing in an entirely different terrain their own struggle for economic and social rights. They were now sufficiently conscious of their backwardness and of their exclusion from many of the social privileges enjoyed by the high-caste Hindus. In Khulna this consciousness had led the Namasudra sharecroppers or *bargadars* to form a combination with their Muslim counterparts in 1928–29. Together they refused to cultivate land unless they were given a two-thirds share of the produce – a clear anticipation of the *tebhaga* movement of the 1940s. In the neighbouring areas of Jessore and Faridpur also, the *bargadars* of the two communities combined for a similar agrarian demand. Moreover, in Jessore the poorer Namasudras, who once used to work as menials in the houses of the higher caste people, now gave it up almost totally. The economic struggle therefore also had broader social implications, as it was accompanied by demands for honour and equal civic facilities as well.⁵⁶ In 1929 this assumed wider dimensions in Dacca district, where the local Namasudras organised a prolonged *satyagraha* to secure their entry into the Kali temple at Munshiganj.⁵⁷

In the entire eastern part of India, from the early twentieth century onwards, untouchability in general and temple entry in particular had become important issues attracting public attention as well as collective action, both on the parts of the depressed classes themselves and also by their high-caste benefactors. For example, some time in the early 1920s the Namasudras had fought their way into the famous Kamakshya temple in Assam.⁵⁸ In 1926, Jogendranath Mandal, an as yet unknown Namasudra student at Brajomohan College in Barisal, had organised a vigorous campaign in support of one of his Namasudra classmates who had been assaulted by the higher castes for the alleged crime of entering the local *Kalibari* (Kali temple).⁵⁹ In the same year a similar incident – a Namasudra inadvertently touching a Brahman priest and being heckled afterwards – had created a public furore in eastern Bengal.⁶⁰ In response to such actions all over India, the Calcutta Congress in 1928 resolved that it would be 'the duty of all Congressmen, being Hindu, to do all they can to remove untouchability',⁶¹ so that the untouchables could also be involved in the enterprise of nationalism. But the people who were

really alarmed at these recent developments were the protagonists of Hindu solidarity, who apprehended that such independent initiative and militant self-consciousness of the lower castes might lead to a division in Hindu society and create difficulties in offering a united front against the Muslims. The Hindu organisations therefore sought to create a public awareness in favour of removing the blotch of untouchability and opening the Hindu temples to erstwhile untouchables.⁶² The Munshiganj *satyagraha* was a direct outcome of this Hindu solidarity project, though its success depended largely on the initiative of the local Namasudras.

Some reports from Dacca suggest that the Namasudras in the late nineteenth century could enter the courtyards of the local temples, though not the *sanctum sanctorum*; nor could they touch the idols – but then, only the Brahmans had such rights.⁶³ The restrictions became more rigorous at the turn of the century as a high-caste reaction against the growing self-assertiveness of the Namasudras. Insistence on the latter's caste disability, in other words, became for the higher castes a cultural idiom for expressing their social authority. And Munshiganj, the venue of a significant Brahman conference in 1912,⁶⁴ was well-known as a stronghold of high-caste Hindu conservatism, where trouble had been brewing between the Brahmans and the Namasudras for a long time. In November 1928, a poor Namasudra showed the temerity of walking into the Kali temple, a place of public worship raised by peoples' subscription, and ask for a sip of *charanamrita* or the holy water in which the feet of the Mother goddess had been dipped. Soon his caste was discovered, and at once he was pounced upon by the priest and mercilessly belaboured by others present. This act of social humiliation created a deep bruise in the hearts of the local Namasudra community.⁶⁵ The protest meeting that was organised on 9 December to condemn the bigotry of the high-caste Hindus attracted no less than three thousand Namasudras from around the region.⁶⁶

It was to heal such fractures in the Hindu community that the fifth Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference was held in Dacca on 26 August 1929, with Swami Satyananda of Hindu Mission as the principal speaker. One of the resolutions passed in the conference stipulated that every Hindu had equal right to enter every public place of worship. This perhaps emboldened the Munshiganj Namasudras, who approached Swami Satyananda, already well known among them for his temple entry movements organised in 1927–28 in Jessore–Khulna region.⁶⁷ The Swami forthwith decided to take up their cause and channelise their rightful indignation into a *satyagraha*. On 29 August, a meeting was held

near the Munshiganj Kali temple under the auspices of the Hindu Mission, with the Swami delivering an inspiring speech. It was resolved that on the morning of the 30th a mass procession of the Namasudras would force their entry into the *Kalibari*. The Subdivisional Officer, apprehending a breach of peace, immediately issued a prohibitory order under section 144 CrPC against the leaders, forbidding them to hold any meeting or procession. But in spite of that, the next morning the Swami with 25 Namasudra volunteers attempted to enter the temple. They were prevented by a police-guard, whereupon they retreated and took their seats in the *Natmandir* or the courtyard within the temple premises.⁶⁸ Dr Mohini Mohan Das, the Namasudra Swarajist MLC, rushed to Munshiganj the same evening and talked to the local Kayastha SDO; there were no other incidents that night.⁶⁹

Since then, however, the *satyagraha* continued ceaselessly, with groups of Namasudra youths taking up position in the outer precincts of the temple and being relieved at intervals. The Munshiganj Bar Association, which was in charge of the management of the temple, held a meeting on 5 September. But it resolved, after a heated discussion for about three hours, that the Namasudras and other untouchables had no right to enter the inner shrine of the temple, as it was 'not . . . sanctioned or recognised by any local usage or custom'. This naturally worsened the situation, as the battle lines were now more clearly drawn and the prospects of any amicable settlement became much too remote. Although the Congress had not actively intervened in the matter until now, except for the brief appearance of Mohini Mohan, the sympathies of the local leaders were with the *satyagrahis*, as it offered an excellent opportunity to win the hearts of a locally dominant depressed class. On 6 September, therefore, some local Hindu leaders, like Karuna Kishor Guha and Manoranjan Banerjee, along with the Swarajist MLCs, Pratul Chandra Ganguli and Mohini Mohan, visited Munshiganj to study the situation locally. The District Magistrate also welcomed the gesture, as Ganguli, being a Kulin Brahman himself, was thought to be the best person to effect a settlement. The team had lengthy discussions with the leaders of the movement as well as with some of the orthodox pleaders; but the crisis could not be resolved. In the meanwhile, a strong police force was also stationed at the spot to prevent any forceful entry against the wishes of those in charge of the temple.⁷⁰

The attempts of the local nationalists to effect a negotiated settlement in Munshiganj failed also because, as in Vaikkam *satyagraha* in Travancore about four years ago,⁷¹ they were not adequately supported by a vacillating Congress high command. In reply to a letter from the

President of the Hindu Mission, Jamnalal Bajaj, then the Convener of the Anti-Untouchability Committee of the All India Congress Committee (AICC), wrote that the existing conditions did not warrant the beginning of a *satyagraha* and that the issue of temple entry was much too delicate to be handled in such a brash way, as it had the potential of creating internal dissension within the Hindu community. Then, in a typical Gandhian way,⁷² he suggested that if *satyagraha* was at all to be resorted to, the initiative had to be taken by the caste Hindus alone, and not by the untouchables themselves.⁷³ A few days later, in December 1929 at an All India Suppressed Classes Conference at Lahore, Gandhi cautioned all such *satyagrahis* in more emphatic terms: 'Those temples where you are excluded from, because of your low birth, have no gods in them and those who enter them forcibly have no godliness within them.' There were two other temple *satyagrahas* organised around the same time – the Parvati *satyagraha* in Poona in 1929 and the Nasik *satyagraha* of 1930 – neither of which received the support of the Congress high command.⁷⁴

But the local nationalists were not prepared to let this opportunity go, as the movement gathered new momentum around the middle of October. On the *Mahashtami* day (14 October) nearly two thousand Namasudra *satyagrahis* congregated at the precincts of the temple and led by Swami Satyananda and other nationalist leaders like Nripendra Chandra Banerjee and Surendra Chandra Majumdar, proceeded to the main shrine in orderly batches. But the resistance from the police guard turned the peaceful procession into a violent mob; the police retaliated with *lathis*, injuring about 17 Namasudras. Majumdar and Banerjee were arrested immediately; but the SDO 'deliberately refrained' from arresting any of the Namasudras; no action was taken against Swami Satyananda either. Soon after, the police guard was withdrawn; but the press criticised the government for spilling the blood of innocent *satyagrahis* and appealed to the Congress to intervene 'in the interest of a wider nationalism'.⁷⁵

This possibility of greater nationalist intervention had alarmed the government as well. While the local administration was looking at the situation as a law and order problem, the authorities in Calcutta put it in its proper political perspective. They did not like 'the Magistrate and the Police upholding the Bar Association's rights in the temple against the claims of the Namasudras' and the Magistrate allowing Pratul Ganguli to take the initiative to effect a settlement. 'It is undesirable that the Government should be placed in the position of appearing to side with either party in this dispute and of using the Police to support the action

of one section of the Hindu community', wrote the Chief Secretary to the District Magistrate of Dacca. Every encouragement should of course be given to settle this dispute by compromise, he further noted, 'but care should be taken not to encourage the idea that the Swarajist Party and not Government are the real friends to the depressed classes'.⁷⁶ The District Magistrate had also visited Munshiganj earlier and had made almost the same suggestion to the Subdivisional Officer. The police guard on the temple, he thought, was unnecessary and might cause a bad impression on the public. In fact, there was a great consternation among the local people, as it was strongly rumoured that punitive tax would be levied to meet the expenses of the police guard at the temple gate. But the SDO did not accept the suggestion, as he sensed imminent trouble. Himself a Kayastha, he shared the conviction that the Namasudras did not have any legitimate right to force their way into the temple.⁷⁷

The conservative elements in the Munshiganj Bar Association, however, stood their ground and rejected all proposals of a compromise. Several appeals from Swami Satyananda and the Hindu Mission, as well as the local nationalist leaders, had already failed to persuade them otherwise. There had been pressures from outside as well. Among the provincial Congress leaders, the BPCC President Subhas Chandra Bose was reported to have taken a keen interest in the *satyagraha*, though it was his political rival J. M. Sengupta who actually managed to visit Munshiganj on 28 October. He tried to effect a compromise settlement; but the custodians of the temple refused to budge and a frustrated Sengupta left Munshiganj wishing success to the *satyagrahis* and advising them to remain non-violent.⁷⁸

Contrary to his advice, the movement hereafter took an ugly turn, with violence breaking out on a number of occasions. The Bar Association, interestingly, hired Muslim guards to resist the *satyagrahis* and when they refused to assault the peaceful squatters, two Nepali guards were employed to do the job. They beat up the *satyagrahis* on several occasions in November and December, and what is important, the latter also returned the compliment. Meanwhile, outside interventions to effect a compromise also continued, but with no positive result. Among the important personalities who visited Munshiganj during this time were Swami Viswananda of recent Tarakeswar *satyagraha* fame and Padmaraj Jain, the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha. None of them succeeded in softening the uncompromising attitude of the orthodox pleaders. But the movement then took an abrupt turn from May 1930: 16 May morning, six local young men, belonging to high-caste Hindu families, resorted to an indefinite hunger strike to bring their

elders to senses. Swami Satyananda, along with another of his compatriots, joined them. The event had a tremendous emotional impact on the local population and it galvanised the local women into action. On the morning of 17 May, about two hundred women from respectable high-caste Hindu families, amidst loud cheers of *Bande Mataram*, opened the gates of the Munshiganj Kalibari to Hindus of all classes – this time without any resistance from their menfolk. The *satyagraha* thus came to ‘a strange ending’ after 261 days.⁷⁹

The Munshiganj temple *satyagraha* was thus a successful campaign of the Namasudra masses against the power elites of Hindu orthodoxy. And it was indeed more radical than the well-known Vaikkam *satyagraha*, which was to use only a road in front of the temple and not to enter the temple itself. Moreover, the conflict in that case was ultimately resolved by the government creating alternative diversionary lanes to diffuse the tension. The Bengal Namasudras, on the other hand, showed a tremendous amount of initiative and organisation and successfully sustained the movement for more than eight months until an honourable ending was reached. The leaders toured in the villages of the region, recruited volunteers for the movement, and on occasions two to three thousand people would congregate to take part in collective action in an admirably disciplined way.

In this whole episode, however, the established caste organisations of the Namasudras played, if at all, only a peripheral role. The only Namasudra leader who could claim high visibility during the whole course of the movement, was the Swarajist MLC Mohini Mohan Das. His wife was active too, and it was under her leadership that on 17 November more than five hundred Namasudra women, some of them with babies in their arms, had proceeded peacefully towards the temple gate in yet another futile attempt to force it open. But apart from these two, the other leaders appeared briefly and disappeared quickly from the scene, contributing only their verbal sympathy. Some of the Namasudra ‘leaders from different districts’ were reported to have visited Munshiganj in the evening of 1 September, only to urge the *satyagrahis* to continue their movement. Bharat Chandra Sarkar, the Secretary of the All Bengal Namasudra Association, made a brief appearance in October to assure Swami Satyananda of ‘his whole-hearted support’. On 21 October 1929, the Dacca District Namasudra Association held a meeting at Regent Park in Dacca under the chairmanship of Birat Chandra Mandal. Its contribution was a resolution requesting the Government ‘to take necessary steps to protect this right [to enter Hindu temples] in connexion [sic] with the *satyagraha* movement at Munshiganj Kali

temple'.⁸⁰ Then followed in early December the All Bengal Depressed Classes Conference at the Bar Association Hall in Dacca. 'A number of resolutions' were adopted in this conference, with one also referring to the Munshiganj temple *satyagraha* movement.⁸¹ The twelfth All Bengal Namasudra Conference was held next in the last week of December at the Regent Park Hall in Dacca, where the presidential address of Birat Chandra Mandal 'dealt with the Munshiganj *satyagraha*', along with several other issues, such as 'spread of education, improvement of the economic condition of the community, employment of scientific methods of agriculture and fishery', and so on.⁸² The report that appeared in the *Liberty* on the resolutions passed in this conference is worth quoting here in full, in order to understand how the Munshiganj *satyagraha* appeared in the priority list of the leaders of this caste:

At the All-Bengal Namasudra Conference held at Dacca on December 28 and 29 resolutions were passed welcoming the Viceregal announcement regarding Dominion status and Round Table Conference and demanding the selection of one-fifth of the Indian delegates therein from the Namasudra community in view of their population; condemning the Majority Report of the Indian Central Committee and supporting the Munshiganj *Satyagraha*, the Primary Education Bill and urging Government to reserve two seats on the proposed Central Jute Committee for members of All Bengal Namasudra Association.⁸³

There were also other Namasudra meetings held around the same time where the Munshiganj *satyagraha* did not appear at all on the agenda. We may mention in this regard the special general meeting of the Young Men's Namasudra Association held at Calcutta on 14 December or, near at hand, the Narayanganj meeting of the Bikrampur Namasudra Association held on 30 December, under the chairmanship of Birat Chandra Mandal himself, or the West Bengal Namasudra Conference held at Budge Budge in April 1930 with Mukunda Behari Mullick in the chair.⁸⁴ The situation makes it clear that the leaders of the Namasudra caste organisations had now very limited interest left, if at all, in the protest movements of the masses. This shift in their political priorities became much clearer in their Khulna District Conference of 1930. The conference was publicly described as a meeting not of the Namasudra peasants, but of their educated and professional descendants and it was at this gathering that their leader Guruchand emphasised the need for political power to be gained through participation in institutional politics.⁸⁵ In all the meetings that followed during the next few years, as

we shall see later, institutional politics remained the central focus of all deliberations, peasant issues gradually being pushed aside or even out of the agenda.

But this did not mean that the Namasudra peasants, as a result of the changing political scenario, had been drawn closer to the Congress or were more closely integrated into the Hindu society. Not that the widely publicised Munshiganj *satyagraha* had no impact on the local Hindu society: in December 1930 the Secretary of the Brahmanbaria Ananta Mayee Kalibari committee, in a rare show of generosity, agreed to the holding of the forthcoming All Bengal Namasudra Conference in the spacious *natmandir* of the temple. But such gestures, for which the Namasudra leaders were very grateful,⁸⁶ appear to have had little or no impact on the Namasudra peasantry, who were still nurturing their bitter memories of a desperate struggle. They had to fight this battle, in real concrete terms, all alone, with the only valuable assistance of Swami Satyananda of Hindu Mission, the provincial and local Congress leadership offering only occasional, though very limited, sympathetic intervention. With a reluctant high command and a hesitant provincial leadership, the local Congress leaders, despite their sincere efforts, failed to use this movement to gain the confidence of this important segment of the Bengal peasantry. To make matters worse, some of the local Congress committees, the Faridpur district Congress for example, were pathetically weakened by 'internecine feuds'.⁸⁷ Their failure to mobilise the Namasudra peasantry became painfully evident during the Civil Disobedience movement started in 1930 with its demand for *purna swaraj*.

This second round of Congress mass movement began with Gandhi's historic Dandi March on 12 March 1930 and assumed critical proportions after his arrest in May. The movement gradually began to attract wider public attention and involvement, and in Bengal different independent streams of protest politics gradually merged into it.⁸⁸ But an important exception was the Namasudra peasantry of eastern Bengal who still found no reason to support this Congress-led political movement. In June 1930, the Namasudras organised two anti-civil Disobedience meetings in the district of Faridpur. Similar meetings, sometimes with the collaboration of the Muslims, were also reported from Bakarganj. In Pirojpur, which was the most active centre of the movement in this district, there was picketing in Namasudra areas such as Swarupkati, Kaukhali and Bhandaria, to boycott foreign goods. But in all these *hats* (weekly markets) in the interior, the Congress picketers had to face active resistance from the Namasudras and the Muslims, who

thus made their opposition to the movement sufficiently clear. Similarly, in Jessore and Khulna, the Muslims and the Namasudras in general kept themselves away from the Civil Disobedience movement.⁸⁹ Some of them, it is true, had been persuaded by the Congress to participate, as one such meeting was reported from Swarupkati, where a Namasudra was 'induced to preside'. But apart from such isolated pro-Congress speakers, who were reported to have been 'widely exploited by the congress', the Namasudras on the whole behaved in such a way that the British intelligence officers were convinced of their being 'solidly anti-Congress' and 'stoutly opposed to the present agitation and to those responsible for it'.⁹⁰ So sure was the government about their alienation from the nationalists, and consequently of their loyalty, that in 1931 it decided to recruit Namasudras in larger numbers in the armed branch of the Police, 'to meet the disturbed conditions which resulted from the civil disobedience movement'.⁹¹ But this alienation of the Namasudra masses from the most recent wave of nationalist upsurge was unconnected with the politics of their caste organisations. The latter looked at mainstream nationalism from a different perspective and at this stage aimed solely at securing access to power within the new framework of institutional politics in India – a domain which the peasantry still found difficult to grapple with.

III

At this organised level also, the depressed classes lobby had from the very beginning maintained its distance from the Civil Disobedience movement. The Executive Committee of the All India Depressed Classes Association, in a meeting at Simla on 13 July 1930, condemned this movement as an agitation 'started by the extremists [sic] politicians in the country . . . to overthrow the British rule in India', and called upon the provincial associations to organise movements to fight it with all their strength. The meeting, which was attended by the Bengal Namasudra leader Birat Chandra Mandal, further expressed its pleasure at the announcement of the Round Table Conference, opposed the immediate granting of dominion status to India before the removal of untouchability and demanded special electorate to safeguard their political rights.⁹² At the provincial level also, a meeting of the Bengal Depressed Classes Association, presided over by Mukunda Behari Mullick, wholeheartedly greeted the Report of the Simon Commission and condemned the joint electorate as 'positively harmful'.⁹³ In August 1930,

the Namasudra members of the Bengal Legislative Council voted against a resolution that demanded dominion status for India.⁹⁴

When the Civil Disobedience movement was withdrawn, followed by the resumption of the Round Table Conference, the All India Depressed Classes' Leaders' Conference that met in Bombay on 19 May, attended by Rasiklal Biswas from among the Namasudras of Bengal, welcomed it. As a safeguard against high-caste domination exerted through the Congress, these leaders now asked for 'their right as a minority to separate electorates'.⁹⁵ It will be misleading to suggest, however, that there was a consensus among the depressed classes on this issue of a separate electorate. When the second Round Table Conference was in progress, several Namasudra and other depressed classes leaders adopted resolutions in support of joint electorate and sent telegrams to Gandhi expressing full confidence in his leadership and repudiating Ambedkar's claim to represent the Bengal depressed classes.⁹⁶ Interestingly, while a formal meeting of the Dacca District Namasudra Association emphasised the necessity of separate electorate for the Namasudra community, the president and the secretary of the Association sent separate memoranda to the Franchise Committee, 'strongly opposing the introduction of separate electorates for the depressed classes' and advocating 'adult franchise' as the best possible alternative.⁹⁷

Subsequently, this issue of a separate electorate created a rift in the all-India depressed classes movement itself, with M. C. Rajah forming a pact with B. S. Moonje, of the Hindu Mahasabha, on joint electorate with reservation of seats. This conflict by 1932 sharply divided the Bengal Namasudra leadership as well: organisations like Bengal Namasudra Franchise Board, Jessore District Namasudra Association and Gopalganj Namasudra Unnati Bidhayini Samiti now began to support Rajah's plea for joint electorate with reserved seats, while a powerful group headed by the Bengal Namasudra Association sided with Ambedkar and his demand for a separate electorate.⁹⁸ At a conference in Nagpore in May 1932, the resolution that upheld Ambedkar's minorities pact regarding a separate electorate, proposed at the Round Table Conference, was moved by no other person than Bengal's Mukunda Behari Mullick.⁹⁹ Already in March, in his Minute as the Member of the Bengal Franchise Committee, Mullick had argued that 'the term "Hindu" does not indicate any *homogeneous* race'. At the one end, there were the more privileged castes, while at the other, there were the deprived millions of the depressed classes who formed about 20 per cent of the population of Bengal. Proper and effective representation of these people could be guaranteed only if 'their representation . . . [was] from

amongst themselves and in proportion to their numerical strength'.¹⁰⁰ But the problem was that another leader of the depressed classes, the President of the Bangiya Janasangha, argued before the Franchise Committee that the, 'Depressed or backward classes are *not* a homogeneous body. It is feared that in case of separate electorate, only one or two highly organised big communities will monopolise privileges', and they were the Namasudras and the Rajbansis.¹⁰¹ Thus Mullick's own argument could also be used against him, as in community centric politics a community would always like to be represented by its own members. The real problem therefore was how to define a community, as communities were defined and redefined continually within a changing context of power relations and out of a socially shifting sense of relative deprivation.

The situation was further complicated by the announcement of the Communal Award in August 1932, allocating ten seats to the depressed classes in Bengal, to be filled in through special electorates. The depressed classes were partly satisfied because of the special electorate; but they were disgruntled too, as the number of seats they received fell far short of their expectations. But as the nationalist criticism of the award went on mounting, they also threw their gauntlets down to defend it. There was yet another interesting development. At this juncture, a number of Namasudra leaders, like Amulyadhan Ray, Sarat Chandra Bal, Lalit Kumar Bal, etc., led by Guruchand Thakur's England returned barrister grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (popularly known as P. R. Thakur) – who did not see eye-to-eye with Mukunda Behari Mullick and his group – formed a new organisation called the All Bengal Depressed Classes Federation, which would henceforth run as a parallel organisation to the already existing Association, dominated by the Mullick group. The differences between the two organisations do not seem to be those of ideology, but rather of personality, indicating a formal split in the leadership of the movement, as it now took the plunge more deeply into the rough waters of constitutional politics. In other words, as access to power through a separate electorate now seemed imminent, the scramble for power also began at different levels – both among the depressed classes and within the Namasudra movement itself.

Under the auspices of the new Federation, a special session of the All Bengal Depressed Classes' Conference was held on 28 August 1932, with the renowned Rajbansi leader Panchanan Barma in the chair. P. R. Thakur in his welcome address, thanked His Majesty's Government for creating a special constituency for the depressed classes, but expressed his utter dissatisfaction at the number of seats allocated to them in the

Bengal legislature. The meeting adopted five resolutions: the first 'reiterate[d] its unswerving loyalty to the Crown'; the second 'place[d] on record its strong condemnation of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the terrorist outbreaks'; the third demanded 'at least thirty-seven seats in the Bengal Legislature out of the eighty seats in the general constituency'; the fourth thanked the Prime Minister and the British cabinet 'for accepting the principle of the separate electorate' for the depressed classes; and the fifth opposed a second chamber 'as being pernicious to their interests'.¹⁰² The resolutions, in other words, outlined in clear terms the main political demands and attitudes of a dominant section of the depressed classes' leadership in Bengal, many of them being prominent Namasudras.

Their open support for the Communal Award and the principle of a separate electorate no doubt alarmed the nationalists. Several meetings were held in Calcutta and in the interior, to remove untouchability and to address the other grievances of the depressed classes, so that they too might agree to joint electorate. Two such meetings were held in quick succession, on 15 and 18 September 1932, in Barisal where local depressed classes leaders were persuaded to support joint electorate and protest against the proposals of separate electorate.¹⁰³ But politically motivated as these meetings often were, they did not always reflect any genuine sympathy for or understanding of the apprehensions of the depressed classes. As an example, the meeting held in Faridpur town on 17 September 1932, under the auspices of the local Bar Association, may be cited. It was attended mainly by the caste Hindus and Congress workers, while some local Namasudras including their leader Sarat Chandra Bal were also persuaded to attend. The president of the meeting spoke at length of the necessity to remove all the social and religious grievances of the depressed classes so that they too could agree to a revision of the Communal Award. The resolution that was moved hereafter requested the latter to accept joint electorate with reservation of seats. But when Bal suggested a number of amendments to it and asked for more time for proper consideration of its implications by the other members of his community not present in the meeting, his amendments were disallowed and the request turned down. A more pliable Namasudra was then found out by the Congressites to move the resolution, which Bal and his group opposed vehemently. But ultimately, finding themselves grossly outnumbered, the latter walked out in protest, amidst jostling and showering of abusive words by the students and the Congress volunteers. Later, the organisation of the Faridpur depressed classes refused to be bound by the decision of this 'partial meeting' of

people who had always in the past had oppressed them in every conceivable way.¹⁰⁴ The bridging of the gulf through gentle persuasion, it seemed, was not yet the way of the local Congress leaders.

But the political situation in the country took an abrupt turn with Gandhi's decision to fast unto death to secure the abrogation of a special electorate for the depressed classes. To review the situation, the Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association, which P. R. Thakur had founded after his return from England,¹⁰⁵ held a special general meeting on 22 September, i.e., two days after the commencement of the fast. The meeting, participated by the members of various castes like Namasudra, Kapali, Chamar, Malo, Kaibartta etc., unanimously resolved to 'support and approve of the Communal Award', implicitly, even at the risk of threatening Mahatma's life.¹⁰⁶ Two days later, on 24 September, the President of the Association wrote to His Majesty, the King Emperor, demanding at least fifty seats for the depressed classes in the Bengal legislature, at least two ministers in the cabinet, along with other terms as laid down by Ambedkar. He also implored the Government not to trust those fake self-seeking leaders of the depressed classes, who were being 'impelled by the Congress' to betray the cause of their own community.¹⁰⁷ Outside Faridpur, the Pabna Depressed Classes Association, also headed by a Namasudra leader called Madhusudan Sarkar, held a meeting on 20 September, the day Gandhi started his historic fast. The meeting unanimously resolved that 'the depressed class people pray for and demand a separate electorate instead of a joint electorate with the caste Hindus', for they believed that 'no welfare can be done to them by the caste Hindus'. The meeting also resolved that the depressed classes were not to be 'bound up by any resolutions passed or rules formed by the Provincial Hindu Sabha' which was an organisation of the caste Hindus. Instead of co-operating with such people, they would rather 'like to live in a segregated condition as from time immemorial'.¹⁰⁸

Gandhi ended his fast on 24 September when the representatives of the depressed classes and the caste Hindus signed in his presence what is popularly known as the Poona (or Yeravda) Pact. The agreement accepted the principle of reservation of seats for the depressed classes out of the general electorate seats in the provincial legislature – in Bengal the number of such reserved seats was to be thirty, instead of ten provided in the Communal Award. Election to these seats would be by joint electorates, subject however to a special two-tier election procedure.¹⁰⁹ The Bengal Namasudra Association and the Bengal Depressed Classes Association pointed out immediately that this preliminary election and the panel procedure would ultimately lead to a failure of the true and

effective representation of the depressed classes.¹¹⁰ If the Scheduled Castes failed to send more than four candidates, exclaimed Sarat Chandra Bal in the Legislative Council in 1935, 'what will be the result? . . . a boon will be turned into a curse'.¹¹¹ But apart from this, what the Bengal depressed classes leaders were really furious about was the loss of special electorate provisions. On the very next day after the signing of the Pact, the Secretary of the Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association informed the Government that they were 'not at all prepared to agree to the terms of the Agreement'. Because the number of seats allotted to them was inadequate and the procedure of election faulty, as in the joint elections the rich and influential Hindus and *zamindars*, together with the Congress people, would exert their influence 'to return their hired men from the depressed classes'. The condition in Bengal, they emphasised, was different from that of the other provinces and therefore, 'Dr Ambedkar ought to have consulted the leaders of the provinces before he advance[d] to sign the Agreement as reached for himself'.¹¹² Two days later, on the 27th, the Depressed Classes Federation also condemned the Poona Pact as 'Dr Ambedkar's political blunder' and upheld the Communal Award as 'a political advantage unprecedented and unparalleled in the constitutional history of India'.¹¹³

But Mukunda Behari Mullick and his group had a serious dilemma. This was partly due to their close association with Ambedkar and partly because one of their members, Rasiklal Biswas, now also the Secretary of the All India Depressed Classes Federation, was personally present at Poona. He sincerely believed that the allocation of thirty seats to the Bengal depressed classes in the provincial legislature was based on a careful consideration of their population ratio and was therefore justified.¹¹⁴ Still, there was the other more sensitive issue of separate electorate. The Bengal Namasudra Association and the Depressed Classes Association, in an emergency joint meeting on 26 September, unanimously resolved that 'the alleged settlement does not at all solve the problem so far as Bengal is concerned; and the Depressed Classes of Bengal at least are not bound by it'. Dr Ambedkar, the two associations noted 'with extreme regret', had 'assumed the role of a dictator' and 'practically gave away the real cause of the depressed classes' without even consulting the All India Depressed Classes Federation. The representatives of these classes who had gathered at Poona, it was also noted, had 'practically no experience of any election' and could therefore be very easily 'hood-winked' by 'a body of clever, caste-ridden Hindus'. The settlement thus arrived at was extremely faulty; the joint electorate could never ensure proper representation, while the panel system was

indeed 'a device to introduce a rupture and ultimately a failure of the true and effective representation of the depressed classes'. Hence, the government was requested 'to keep to the spirit of the Award given by the Premier on this intricate communal question'.¹¹⁵

But within a couple of weeks the two associations met again and decided to accept the Poona Pact as 'the next best thing for them'.¹¹⁶ Subsequently the leaders of the Depressed Classes Federation also came to the same decision as the Pact, now also accepted by the Government, seemed to be irrevocable; but they accepted it 'by necessity' and 'not by choice'.¹¹⁷ This necessity for the two groups to come closer in defence of the Poona Pact had been caused by the growing Non-Congress orthodox Hindu opposition to the Pact, due to the loss of thirty seats to the depressed classes.¹¹⁸ When Jitendralal Banerjee in March 1933, moved in the Bengal Legislative Council his resolution for the withdrawal of the Settlement so far as Bengal was concerned, both Amulyadhan Ray, the Secretary of the Federation and Mukunda Behari Mullick, the President of the Association, and both Namasudras by caste, rose together to resist this orthodox Hindu backlash. The resolution was finally carried, in spite of all the seven depressed classes members voting against it. This voting pattern showed, as Ray later argued, 'the necessity of . . . [their] special representation and the truth of . . . [their] allegation that caste prejudices . . . [were] being reflected in political matters'.¹¹⁹

The Poona Pact, however, seemed to be a settled fact which, with a White Paper now released, could no longer be revoked; but the controversy lingered on. A few days later, Gandhi wrote a rejoinder to his 'Bengal friends': 'If they accepted the Pact in order to save my life, surely, they had their consideration, and it comes with ill-grace from them now to repudiate a completed bargain'.¹²⁰ But the latter seemed bent on undoing it and in their polemics the Namasudras and the Rajbansis, the two more articulate groups among the depressed classes, became the main targets of attack. To ensure the withdrawal of the White Paper, Sir Nripendranath Sircar, the Advocate General of Bengal, circulated in London a series of pamphlets among the members of the British Parliament and the Joint Select Committee, complaining that the agreement had been obtained by 'coercion'.¹²¹ In one of them he argued: 'If the proposals contained in the White Paper stand, it will mean nothing to the really depressed classes, but the Council will be swamped by the well-organised and advanced Namasudras and Rajbansis, who have no claim whatsoever to come under the depressed classes.'¹²² Such propaganda also provoked angry rejoinders from the Namasudra leaders. P. R. Thakur in a press statement cautioned that such irresponsible

pamphlets might 'aggravate the communal tension with disastrous results'.¹²³ 'The depressed classes are necessarily driven into a separate body', he said in another statement, 'and, as such, they do not think that their political interests will be well looked after by mere thirty representatives in the future local Bengal Legislative Council. They, therefore, demand at least one membership in the Bengal cabinet on statutory guarantee'.¹²⁴ Thus, if Poona Pact was designed to integrate the depressed classes into the political nation, the orthodox Hindu backlash that followed alienated them even further.

While this debate over political representation was going on, the Namasudra leaders also continued to focus, both within and outside the Council, on their two other favourite issues, namely educational and employment facilities. When in the budget of 1930 no special provision was made for the education of the depressed classes, Sarat Chandra Bal complained that 'justice require[d] . . . that the depressed classes who . . . [were] reputed for their devoted loyalty and sincerity of heart should be protected and every facility be given to ameliorate their condition'.¹²⁵ He also placed a demand for the reservation of 'at least one-third of the appointments for the qualified candidates of the depressed classes as has been done for the Muhammadans'.¹²⁶ This was necessary, as Mukunda Behari Mullick argued after him, because the local recruiting authorities were often influenced by caste prejudices and the high-caste Hindus, 'the so-called leaders of the country', would do nothing for them, 'except showing their sympathy'.¹²⁷

It was not that the government was doing nothing for these people. Some special provisions had already been made for their recruitment to the provincial services. When the list of castes to be specially treated for this purpose came for revision in May 1930, the Namasudras, in spite of the considerable progress they had already made, were retained in that list.¹²⁸ This was deemed necessary because, as an enquiry revealed, in the Namasudra populated areas, particularly in Faridpur, Bakarganj, Jessore and Khulna, the depressed classes were very poorly represented in the services. In Faridpur they occupied only 5.47 per cent, in Bakarganj 1.83 per cent, in Jessore 1 per cent and in Khulna 1.26 per cent of the sanctioned posts, while constituting 23, 15, 22 and 35 per cent of the population of these four districts respectively.¹²⁹ In many cases, of course, there were no suitable candidates forthcoming from these classes. But in Faridpur, there was no dearth of qualified Namasudras aspiring for such positions and in Bakarganj, as the Collector reported, it was only their 'timidity that kept them away', as it was 'notoriously very hard to penetrate the barriers of those who now hold the fort'. These high-caste

Hindus, who constituted only 13.5 per cent of the population in Faridpur and 14.5 per cent in Bakarganj, monopolised 66.6 per cent of appointments in these two districts. As an experimental measure, therefore, the Government in September 1930 decided to recruit depressed class candidates in at least one out of every three non-Muhammadan vacancies in these two districts. It meant, in fact, an informal beginning of reservation of jobs for the depressed classes in Bengal. In other districts, however, the recruiting authorities were only asked to give special encouragement to such candidates, with no reservation being provided for.¹³⁰

But in spite of a Government Memorandum issued in April 1931 to this effect, only a few depressed classes candidates were recruited in the ministerial services. And according to available information, only three Namasudras all over Bengal got any government employment whatsoever during 1931–32.¹³¹ Their representatives in the Council once again raised a furore: the government circular was not being given effect to by the district authorities in Faridpur, complained Sarat Chandra Bal in March 1933. The same thing happened in Bakarganj, Amulyadhan Ray pointed out in April. The government acknowledged that some officers in the districts did not comply with the orders. But in most cases the situation was either due to the dearth of suitable candidates or because of the prior claims of other communities, notably of the Muslims. The Namasudra leaders were more particularly insistent on these demands, as now these had been legitimated by the clauses 8 and 9 of the Poona Pact. A deputation, under the leadership of P. R. Thakur, that met the Governor at Faridpur on 24 July 1933, expressed its concern at the exclusion of these clauses from the White Paper. Thakur also demanded at least 10 per cent of the posts be set aside for the depressed classes and at least one high judicial position, as many among them now had European legal qualifications. (Indeed, he and three others in the delegation were the members of the English bar.) The demands having national implications, the Governor promised to communicate them to proper authorities.¹³² But on the same day, he informed another delegation of Muslims that the government was going to review the whole question of reservation of jobs, and the depressed classes, along with the Muslims, would also be considered in this connection.¹³³

Yet nothing happened immediately and the orchestrated campaign for reservation of jobs continued. Amulyadhan Ray and Sarat Chandra Bal gave notice of a resolution, recommending reservation of 25 per cent of all appointments for the depressed classes, to be discussed in the

February 1934 session of the Legislative Council. The resolution was admitted, but did not reach the stage of discussion.¹³⁴ The same fate greeted a similar resolution which Mukunda Behari Mullick had tabled in the December session of the Council.¹³⁵ Almost simultaneously, the Bengal Depressed Classes Association submitted a complaint to the government against what it considered to be wholly unsatisfactory recruitment rules and demanded the reservation of at least 20 per cent of all positions in public services.¹³⁶ Then again in April 1935, a Namasudra conference in Orakandi urged the government to constitute a service commission exclusively for the purpose of recommending candidates from the depressed classes.¹³⁷ Under such continuous pressure, the Government in June 1935 finally decided to review the situation, and an enquiry revealed that a sufficient number of candidates were in fact forthcoming from among these classes. A memorandum was therefore issued in September 1936 stipulating that 15 per cent of all vacancies in the districts of Dacca, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna, Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad and the twenty-four Parganas, would henceforth be filled in with the members of the depressed classes.¹³⁸ The policy of job reservation for these sections of the Hindu society, which was started experimentally in 1930 in two districts, was thus given nearly a general provincial extension. This was no doubt a remarkable victory for the campaign that had been launched and orchestrated mainly by the Namasudra leaders.

To more satisfaction of these leaders, the provisional list of Scheduled Castes, the new official term for the depressed classes, which the Government announced in January 1933, included the Namasudras.¹³⁹ It also immediately invited opposition, as, for example, the Indian Association thought that the Namasudras, because of 'their education and enlightenment', were 'in no way backward'. They were 'an important community', the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha pointed out, but they had been educated 'to a fairly large extent'. They could therefore by no means be regarded as a depressed class. The Namasudra leaders took strong exception to such subversive propaganda and a meeting of the Depressed Classes Federation on 18 February, presided over by P. R. Thakur, appealed to the Government not to attach any importance to such biased opinions.¹⁴⁰ Altogether seven petitions, including one from the Bengal Namasudra Association, were sent to the Reforms Officer, pleading inclusion in the list. There were also four petitions demanding exclusion; but these were based on the notion, given currency by a recent Hindu Sabha circular, that inclusion would stigmatise the members of the caste. District Officers of all the twelve

districts, where the Namasudras could be found, also unanimously recommended their inclusion. Under the circumstances, the Namasudras were retained in the final list of scheduled castes. Thus was crossed the first hurdle towards enjoyment of special rights to be provided for in the forthcoming constitutional arrangements.

But the other problem, which had more serious implications for the sharing of power, was related to the delimitation of scheduled caste constituencies and allocation of reserved seats, provided for in the Act of 1935. The Namasudras and the Rajbansis were the two communities who had contributed more than others to organise the movement for special constitutional rights; and now they demanded a greater share of the fruits – the apprehension once expressed by the minor scheduled castes thus almost proved to be true. Amulyadhan Ray, in a note to the government, argued that the scheduled caste constituencies should be formed in rural areas and the reserved seats should be allocated to those districts where such castes were most numerous. Applying these criteria, he sought to apportion the major share of the seats, twenty-two out of thirty, for the two main areas: fourteen seats he demanded for the Namasudra areas and eight for the Rajbansi populated districts.¹⁴¹ In a similar note, Sarat Chandra Bal also argued that 'the thirty seats reserved for the depressed classes should be confined to rural areas only' and they should be distributed according to the 'political importance' of different groups within this broad category.¹⁴² In an earlier note, however, he had been more direct: 'to save the loyal section of the depressed classes', he demanded at least four reserved constituencies in his own Faridpur district. Only then, he argued, 'the depressed classes will be saved and the Congress element will die out'.¹⁴³

The final allotment of seats, as recommended by the Provincial Advisory Committee that included Mukunda Behari Mullick, therefore failed to satisfy any of these leaders.¹⁴⁴ The Federation in general approved of the principles followed by the committee, but they were particularly aggrieved as only one seat had been assigned to Bakarganj which contained a large colony of Namasudras. The Scheduled Castes of Bakarganj, who constituted more than 50 per cent of the total Hindu population of the district, complained Sarat Bal in the Legislative Council, had been reduced to 'a minority and placed under the domination of the caste Hindus'. So as a remedy, he demanded one seat from Nadia or elsewhere to be reallocated to Bakarganj.¹⁴⁵ Lalit Kumar Bal also complained of 'a serious injustice . . . done to the scheduled castes of Bakarganj district', who deserved at least two seats. So one more seat, he argued, taken away from any of the west Bengal

districts, should now be given to Bakarganj. But this was not a unanimous opinion, as Amulyadhan Ray stood out to record his 'emphatic protest' against such demands of depriving others of what has already been allocated to them.¹⁴⁶ The government was certainly in no mood to change an arrangement that had been arrived at after careful calculations of checks and balances. So the different parties had really no option but to accept what had been given to them and prepare for the elections.

The Federation had already been making preparations for elections through different conferences, one held at Bongaon in 1934 and another at Jhenida in 1935.¹⁴⁷ The Bengal Namasudra Association was not sitting idle either, although there was a great defection from their ranks, as Rasiklal Biswas now joined the Congress. Mukunda Behari Mullick also became a subject of controversy when he consented to put his signature, along with Biswas, on a Congress-sponsored Hindu Memorial against the granting of separate communal representation to the Muslims.¹⁴⁸ But this did not affect their election prospects. Barring a few, such as Rasiklal Biswas, Jajneswar Mandal or Mohini Mohan Das, who had accepted Congress ticket, most of the Namasudra candidates fought the election as independent candidates, using every ingenuous method that they knew to clinch an electoral victory.¹⁴⁹ The Krishak Praja Party (KPP), the other important political organisation in the province which had already penetrated the ranks of the Namasudra peasantry, decided at this juncture to set its eye exclusively on Muslim votes. In order to project its Muslim image, to withstand Muslim League propaganda that it alone could represent Muslim interests, the KPP did not put up any candidate in Scheduled Caste seats.¹⁵⁰ In the primary elections that took place on 21 November 1936, amidst very little enthusiasm and much less voters' turnout, most of the prominent Namasudra leaders got berth into the final panel for the general election, which was scheduled for January 1937.¹⁵¹

In the general elections, thirteen Namasudras were elected: one of them was a Congress candidate and another came out victorious in a non-reserved seat, while several prominent Federation leaders were defeated. In Jessore the Congressite Rasiklal Biswas defeated Amulyadhan Ray by an impressive margin of 8,277 votes, although he had to concede defeat in Khulna. In the latter district, Mukunda Behari Mullick came out victorious; but Manmatha Ranjan Thakur, P. R. Thakur's younger brother, lost to a non-Namasudra Congress candidate. Mukunda's brother Pulin Behari was elected from Howrah. In Dacca, an unknown Dhananjay Ray defeated the Congress leader Mohini

Mohan Das, notwithstanding his role in the late Munshiganj *satyagraha*. P. R. Thakur and Birat Chandra Mandal were returned from Faridpur, defeating among others, Sarat Chandra Bal and the Congress nominee Jajneswar Mandal. Lalit Kumar Bal was also defeated in Bakarganj by a less known man Upendranath Edbar. The other Namasudra leaders who also won the election in reserved seats, were Madhusudan Sarkar from Bogra-cum-Pabna, Amrita Lal Mandal and Manmohan Das from Mymensingh, and Jagat Chandra Mandal from Tippera. But all these victories and upsetting defeats were overshadowed by the excitement and interest generated in one unreserved constituency, Bakarganj North-East (General) – a predominantly Namasudra area for which the Namasudra leaders had been consistently demanding, even at the risk of depriving others, the allotment of a reserved seat. In this constituency, a young Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mandal, as an independent candidate, defeated in a straight battle – though by a narrow margin – the local popular Congress leader Saral Datta,¹⁵² who happened to be a nephew of Aswini Kumar Datta, still the most popular and revered leader of Bakarganj in living memory. Mandal's victory signified in clear political terms the mentality of the Namasudra peasants, which we will discuss in greater detail in the next section. What is more pertinent here is to mention that proper mass mobilisation could still ensure electoral victory for Namasudra leaders, even without the provision of reservation.

An analysis of the election results shows that while a number of hard-liner Federation leaders were defeated, many of the associates of Mukunda Behari Mullick were successful. This gave him considerable strength in the Assembly which Fazlul Huq of the Krishak Praja Party could hardly ignore when he formed his coalition cabinet along with the Muslim Leaguers and independent Hindus. As anticipated by many, Mullick was given an important portfolio, that of Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness. The dream of sharing power, which the Namasudra leaders fondly nurtured and consistently fought for, thus came true. But the process of its arrival was neither smooth nor was it as yet over. For, Mullick's appointment infuriated the Muslims, as the other contender for this office was the powerful Muslim League leader H. S. Suhrawardy, who was not satisfied with Commerce and Labour. In choosing between Mullick and Suhrawardy, asked the *Star of India*, 'what criterion was adopted in giving to the Hindu the Portfolio which vitally concerned the economic salvation of the debt-oppressed Muslims?' True, the problem also concerned the depressed classes, it agreed, and a minister belonging to those classes could as well deal with it. But was Mullick a true leader of the depressed classes, particularly

when he had sided with the caste Hindus in the campaign against the Communal Award? So it was better if Suhrawardy and Mullick exchanged their portfolios: 'This will satisfy the Muslims and the stability of the Ministry will be ensured.'¹⁵³ The acrimony, however, did not continue for long. Soon there was amity and the new ministry started functioning smoothly and effectively, with the support of the independent Scheduled Caste legislators.

IV

For the Namasudra leaders of this period, the goal of securing constitutional rights and sharing political power thus seemed to have assumed supreme importance. In this constitutional contest the backwardness of the rest of the community could be capitalised on, but its eradication could be suspended till the present battle was over. Of course, the leaders could not afford to ignore the peasants altogether, which explains Sarat Chandra Bal demanding in the Legislative Council in March 1930 an immediate re-excavation of a *khal* (canal) in Gopalganj, through which every year water-hyacinth from the nearby river was entering to destroy paddy and jute plants in more than 174.9 square miles of land in the *bil* areas.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, a depressed classes' conference in Jessore in February 1933 extended wholehearted support to the resolution brought in the Council by Tamizuddin Khan for revising the existing tenancy legislation.¹⁵⁵ But that was all. The leadership had nothing more to offer to the Namasudra peasantry and this indifference was reflected adequately in a number of their meetings. Between 1930 and 1933 a number of important Namasudra public meetings were held in both Calcutta and the countryside and these were addressed by prominent Namasudra leaders like Mukunda Behari Mullick, Birat Chandra Mandal, P. R. Thakur and Rasiklal Biswas. They discussed, as far as it can be gathered from newspaper reports, issues like relationship with upper caste Hindus, 'Allahabad unity proposals', education, sanitation, services, Calcutta corporation elections, 'questions relating to the political and social welfare of the community', like widow remarriage, prohibition on child marriage, raising funds for sending a few of their representatives to London, and supporting the introduction of the Temple Entry Bill in various legislatures.¹⁵⁶ In none of these meetings, any economic issue related to the interests of the peasantry was ever raised and this eventually pushed the latter, now under the leadership of a less known young man Jogendranath Mandal,

more and more towards the *praja* (tenants) movement started in the east Bengal countryside by A. K. Fazlul Huq. This was indeed an interesting new development with far reaching consequences. But before we discuss it, we should look at how and why the other alternative, i.e., the nationalist attempts to mobilise the untouchable masses in general and the Namasudras in particular, failed again during this period.

For the Congress, till the time of the election of 1937, the Communal Award remained the main issue of political campaign, although 'nowhere in the locality', as a Subdivisional Officer in Mymensingh recorded in his tour diary in July 1933, 'was there any knowledge of the "communal award" or the white paper or what they meant'.¹⁵⁷ This mass political ignorance was possibly more widespread than merely a Mymensingh phenomenon. But simultaneously with this political campaign, there were also concerns in some Congress circles for the alienation of the lower castes. Meetings were held and appeals were issued for the elimination of untouchability and for throwing the temple gates open for the people of these classes.¹⁵⁸ Untouchability removal committees were set up in different districts under the tutelage of local Gandhite leaders. But apart from such isolated efforts, sometimes with overt communal agenda,¹⁵⁹ Congress as a political party was in no way involved in the organised untouchability removal campaign launched by Gandhi's Servants of Untouchable Society or the Harijan Sevak Sangh, which had its Bengal branch started in late 1932 with Bidhan Chandra Ray as the President and Satkaripati Ray as the Secretary.

In this campaign, which remained mostly centred in Calcutta, three Namasudra inhabited districts, Jessore, Khulna and Faridpur, received considerable attention, the first two receiving more prominence because of their proximity to Calcutta. In these areas, scores of temples were thrown open to the untouchables; propaganda meetings were organised for their enlightenment; night and day schools were started for their children. To ensure more cross-caste social interaction, *sarbojanin bhoj* or universal feasts were organised, followed by celebrations of *sarbojanin Durga puja*, *Kali puja* and *Saraswati puja* in different areas where members of all castes, including the untouchables, took part equally without any social disability. Some public demonstration of generosity also took place: in some Dacca villages, for example, in February 1933, the caste Hindus ceremonially accepted water from the hands of the untouchables; in Faridpur a District Untouchability conference was held, where Poona Pact was ratified; in Khulna, in March 1933, the caste Hindu students of Daulatpur college hostel agreed to live with the Namasudra inmates, with no separate provision being provided for them.

The Khadi Pratisthan from early 1933 published in magazine form a Bengali version of *Harijan*, while later that year a 'Harijan Day' was celebrated on 24 September to mark the anniversary of the signing of the Poona Pact.¹⁶⁰ But since Congress as a political organisation was never really involved in this anti-untouchability campaign – nor did Gandhi want it to be – it could hardly gain any political advantage from this euphoria.

What was more crucial was that by the end of 1933 enthusiasm in this campaign was itself clearly on the decline. As far as can be ascertained from the monthly reports published in the *Harijan*, the campaign by this time had for all practical purposes come to be focused almost exclusively on the north Calcutta *bustees* (slums), and was being mainly led and financed by the Marwari traders of Burrabazar. By 1934, as its annual report shows, the Sangh had very little activity left in Bengal.¹⁶¹ By this time, as the district officers had already noted in 1933 with a sense of satisfaction, there was 'hardly any genuine interest' left among the people of Bengal, as in other parts of India, in the untouchability question.¹⁶² To arouse the nation's conscience, Gandhi therefore decided to undertake a twenty-one-day fast, to be followed by a tour of the whole country, visiting Bengal on the way in February 1934. But this movement attracted very little attention in Bengal.¹⁶³ Although *kirtans* were held in district and subdivisional towns and also in some villages almost every day,¹⁶⁴ there was in general 'little interest . . . shown' in Mahatmaji's fast. When he set out on his cross-country tour in November, every detail of his movement was reported in the national press in Bengal to create public interest. A number of invitations were also sent to him to visit a large number of places in the province. Yet there were also elements of discord, and such discordant voices were being raised from various quarters and from different ideological positions. The Varnashrama Swarajya Sangha of Calcutta in a telegram informed Gandhi that untouchability was not a live problem in Bengal and so his presence here might 'disturb peace and amity'.¹⁶⁵ 'Untouchability is an integral part of Hindu dharma', wrote, on the other hand, an orthodox Hindu Bengali in 1933; so Gandhi's movement, he and probably many others like him thought, was nothing but an undesirable interference.¹⁶⁶ From a different perspective, the annual conference of the Dacca District Namasudra Association, despite the opposition of a nationalist group, resolved in May that the Harijan movement, as initiated by Gandhi, was not suitable for Bengal; what was needed was a total abolition of caste distinctions.¹⁶⁷ From yet another different standpoint, intellectuals like Dr Surendra Nath Sen had also

begun to argue that 'untouchability, as it is understood in the Mahatma's native province, is conspicuous by its absence here.' It would be 'futile to deny', he agreed, 'that of late much bitterness of feeling has been perceived among the poorer castes'. But one should 'pause and ascertain its origin', he cautioned, before applying 'the miraculous remedy of Mahatma Gandhi'. For, 'the Namasudras and others . . . [were] not so much enthusiastic about temple entry and interdining . . . they [preferred] economic uplift to social privileges . . . It is', Sen concluded, 'a class problem, and not a caste problem.'¹⁶⁸

Possibly in view of all these varied critiques, Gandhi ultimately abandoned his Bengal visit, and substituted it with a short three days' stop at Calcutta in July 1934 to collect money for his Harijan fund and to settle disputes between the local rival Congress factions.¹⁶⁹ But this move frustrated many who were anxiously looking forward to this grand occasion of the Mahatma visiting their village. Particularly relevant here was Gandhi's proposed tour programme in Dacca and Barisal, where at Namasudra meetings 'resolutions were adopted expressing sincere joy at the prospect of Mahatma Gandhi's visit.'¹⁷⁰ Instead, came repeated postponement of dates and then the final cancellation. Local volunteers were asked to undertake walking tours through the villages to explain the cause of the cancellation and collect money for the Harijan fund. But this they found difficult, as the local people were 'disappointed' and the workers 'felt diffident'. At last, a party was set up with seven persons, including three women, to undertake this walking tour in Barisal and it travelled through the villages of the district, covering thirty-two miles in five days. 'The Harijans', wrote Satish Chandra Das Gupta, the main spirit behind this Gandhiite campaign in Bengal, 'saw a ray of hope in this unusual sight of the caste Hindus coming to their villages . . .' and the workers, though they collected only a paltry amount of forty-one rupees, 'returned with a feeling of hope for the cause and inspiration for the future'.¹⁷¹ But the movement which had so much potential for mass mobilisation – something which the Congress could capitalise on – soon died a barren death; from 1935 we hear no more of any such organised untouchability removal campaign in Bengal. And as the nationalist alternative thus failed to resolve the caste question, the attention of the Namasudra peasantry in eastern Bengal gradually shifted to a different kind of movement, based more on a class ideology than on caste metaphors – Dr Surendra Nath Sen was not absolutely wrong after all!

The Namasudra peasantry had always, in the past responded independently to their class problems and since the 1920s peasant organisations had also been acquiring a foothold among them. In 1920,

for example, the Namasudra leader Birat Chandra Mandal, along with Fazlul Huq, had tried to organise among them a Bengal Krishak and Ryot Sabha.¹⁷² The Workers and Peasants Party, founded in 1925, also seriously tried to mobilise the masses in Bengal around a class based ideology. But its predominantly urban intellectual leadership, though many of them had marked socialist leanings, could not make much headway.¹⁷³ The movement which ultimately became popular among the Muslim and Namasudra peasantry of eastern Bengal was the *praja* movement, also started by Huq at a meeting in Jamalpur in Mymensingh in 1914. In 1921, under his inspiration a big *Praja Sammelan* (tenants' conference) was held at village Aguljhara in Gaurnadi Police Station in Bakarganj, where there was a large concentration of cultivating Namasudras. The conference was presided over by Khan Bahadur Hashem Ali Khan, a local Praja leader, and was addressed, among others, by two Namasudra leaders, Jogendranath Mandal and Lalit Kumar Bal. The initial Congress connection of the movement was completely severed by 1928 and some of its early demands, such as for the abolition of *zamindari*, prohibition of illegal exactions and reduction of rents, seemed to have an irresistible appeal to the Muslim and low caste peasantry, though more to the occupancy *raiyyats* than to the *bargadars* among them. The movement gradually spread, with the formation of local *praja samitis*, to other districts of the province, most notably to all parts of eastern Bengal where the Namasudras constituted a significant segment of the peasantry. In 1929 all these local *samitis* were brought under a broad-based provincial tenants' party called the Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti, which in 1936 changed its name into Krishak Praja Party (KPP). During the 1930s this tenants' movement gained in further momentum and more popularity, due to the slump in agricultural prices and non-availability of easy credit due to the depression, and leaders like Mandal mobilised more and more Namasudras under its banner. In districts like Khulna, Bakarganj and Faridpur, a 'no rent mentality' came to prevail and the revenue collection remained well below 70 per cent of the demand.

But in the long run, the KPP could not offer the Namasudra peasants, particularly the rapidly expanding segment of sharecroppers and under-tenants among them, a viable and sustainable political alternative. First of all, it soon began to champion almost exclusively the rich peasants' interests, thus becoming primarily a representative of the newly emerging *jotedar*-money lending classes who were acquiring, *vis-à-vis* the old *zamindar* class, more and more power in the Bengal countryside. The party could not even avoid its eventual communalisation, as the

majority of its members were Muslim peasants of east and north Bengal. The process was completed by the end of 1936, when, for the sake of electoral politics, the KPP disowned completely its Hindu lower caste base. In order to compete with the Muslim League for Muslim votes, it had to project itself as an exclusively Muslim party.¹⁷⁴ But this brief association of the Namasudra peasantry with a tenants' movement, mobilising peasants *qua* peasants across communal boundaries, gave an indication of their political preferences, which became more sharply articulated towards the beginning of the 1940s when they began to respond more positively and overwhelmingly to the mobilisation drives of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, (founded in 1936 under more direct Communist leadership) and later participated in the Tebhaga rebellion.

In 1937, however, in the context of the KPP *volte face*, there was no possibility of the popular support base of the Namasudra caste leadership being undercut by any class-based movement and this ensured their eventual electoral victory. In the elections of that year the Namasudra peasantry had little positive role, except only to elect one or the other of their caste leaders. Although the defeat of a number of old articulate hardliners of the Depressed Classes Federation showed that the peasant voters did not fully identify with their politics, there was no other way for the latter to register their preference for any other alternative politics. But where they had a choice, they did certainly exercise their judgement. This happened in the unreserved but predominantly Namasudra constituency in Bakarganj where, as mentioned earlier, the decision of the KPP of not contesting in the general constituencies had forced Jogendranath Mandal to fight the election as an independent candidate. Mandal's victory in this constituency was particularly remarkable as his opponent Saral Datta was not merely a nephew, but indeed the sole political successor of a childless Aswini Kumar, the imprints of whose political charisma had not as yet completely faded out from local public memory.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, the other caste Hindu candidate in this constituency had just before the election withdrawn in favour of Datta,¹⁷⁶ so that a split in upper caste *bhadralok* votes could be avoided. The result of this constituency therefore showed in bold political terms the mentality of the Namasudra peasantry – their alienation from high-caste *bhadralok* Congress politics and their determination to rally round somebody of their community who had shown sympathy for their class grievances and problems.

These indications went largely unnoticed, however, as the Namasudra leaders proceeded to make political adjustments to gain access to power

by supporting and participating in the coalition ministry with the Krishak Praja Party and the Muslim League. Conversely, however, these arrangements at the top were ignored by the peasantry at the bottom, who continued to make their own decisions and articulate their own choices. Almost immediately after the ministry formation, which signified a formal political alliance between the Muslim and the Namasudra elements in the Legislative Assembly, the peasants of the two communities in the district of Jessore became involved in another fierce riot, around April–May 1938. The issue, as we shall see in Chapter 7, once again was trifling, but it showed very clearly that political settlements at the top could hardly influence the affairs at the grassroots level.

Thus, although the Namasudra leaders by 1937 had secured for themselves a position of power within the new constitutional framework of the British Raj, their social movement certainly had become seriously fractured, if not divided. Their organisations focused more on constitutional debates and institutional concessions and the rights that these leaders asked for, i.e., a separate electorate, educational facilities and job reservation, could hardly interest the peasant masses. The other actors in the play, the Congress or the Krishak Praja Party, also failed to offer any alternative politics to the Namasudra peasantry, who seemed to have at this stage a different agenda for action. As the agrarian disputes in Jessore–Khulna or the temple *satyagraha* in Dacca exhibited, they were still imbued with a spirit of protest, still conscious of their community identity and sensitive about collective honour, still full of hatred for the oppressive high-caste Hindus and therefore still ready to defy their social authority and reject their politics. Their agenda found independent domains of articulation – far removed and distanced from the domain of constitutional politics of their caste leaders. They still voted for the latter, because they had no other option. In other words, the masses and the leaders of the Namasudra community had been gradually moving apart. Even the leaders no longer represented a united front. During the years that followed, their movement continued to pull in different directions, with the more powerful political streams gradually appropriating minor parallel streams at different junctures. The subsequent history of the Namasudra movement is marked by its journey from alienation to integration, although this integration took place at different levels and in varied forms.

Chapter 6

From Alienation to Integration, 1937-1947: The Leaders

The Namasudra movement, until about 1937, as we have already seen, remained alienated and distanced from the nationalist movement under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. The result of the election to Bengal legislature in that year, returning only one Congress nominee out of thirteen successful candidates from this caste, and the subsequent support of these 'Independent' legislators for the non-Congress coalition ministry under Fazlul Huq, confirm this. But the Namasudra movement, as we also have observed, was never a homogeneous one and particularly since the 1930s it had pulled in several directions. After 1937, other developments took place which completely changed the complexion of this movement. During the last decade of colonial rule, when a transfer of power became a distinct possibility and new political alignments were to be effected, the importance of the scheduled castes, representing a sizeable proportion of the non-Muslim population in Bengal, with thirty reserved seats in the provincial legislature, became unmistakably clear to everyone. The more dominant political organisations therefore tried to appropriate the Scheduled Caste movement, the Namasudras being at its forefront. By the time Bengal was partitioned and India achieved independence, the integration of the Scheduled Castes, and thereby of the Namasudras, into the more dominant streams of politics was more or less complete. However, as the Namasudra movement had encapsulated various forms of consciousness, its integration into the mainstream also took place at different levels and was expressed in a variety of forms.

So far as the Namasudra leaders were concerned, while a handful of them stuck to their demand for a separate political identity and traditional alignment with the Muslim League, others, and who gradually came to constitute the majority, joined the Congress by the beginning of the 1940s. This meant a complete reversal of a political stand consistently maintained for more than three decades. This

integrationism was also a trend observable in general in the entire Scheduled Caste movement to which, at least at an organised level, and the mutual jealousies notwithstanding, the Namasudra movement had now effectively merged. This integration of the Scheduled Castes into the most powerful structure of national politics was, however, rooted in the logic of their own movement. Their aim, ultimately, had never been to isolate themselves from the national life, but to gain a position of power within the political nation. For the leaders at least this appeared to have been achieved in the years following the election of 1937 and therefore the time for integration had also arrived. But this process of integration was not without its accompanying tensions and conflicts.

Indeed, the ministry formation in 1937 had itself precipitated a crisis in the institutional politics of Bengal. The Muslim League-Krishak Praja Party coalition government, supported by independent Scheduled Castes, was from the very beginning opposed by the Congress. Even many of the Krishak Praja members were not very happy with the composition of the new cabinet, as at least nine out of its eleven members were certainly from the *zamindar* class. The gradually deepening rupture between the Krishak Praja Party and its one time undisputed leader and the present premier Fazlul Huq made the latter completely dependent on Muslim League for political survival. This dependence increased further because of the continuous opposition of the Congress, resulting finally in Huq's joining the Muslim League in its annual session in Lucknow in October 1937. The coalition ministry, now being fully dominated by the Muslim League, thus completely changed its political complexion.¹ It was reconstituted in June 1938, when another dissident, Syed Nausher Ali, was dropped.² Throughout this period, however, the cabinet included two Scheduled Caste ministers, Prasannadeb Raikat from among the Rajbansis and Mukunda Behari Mullick of the Namasudra community.

But most of the Scheduled Caste MLAs (Member of Legislative Assembly), who had started their legislative career by supporting the coalition ministry, soon became disillusioned with it. This was not because the new ministry did not do anything for the poor peasants whom these legislators were representing. Indeed, the record of the first Fazlul Huq ministry was not too bad in this regard,³ though it may be argued, as indeed it was at that time, that most of the agrarian measures which had been taken by the Huq ministry were to serve the predominant Muslim peasant interests and went against the Hindu landowning and creditor classes. The Education Bill was also meant to establish the control of the 'majority community', the Muslims, on the Secondary Education Board, which was to be constituted on a communal

basis.⁴ But it is also a fact that many of these measures could benefit the lower caste Hindu peasantry in general, and the Namasudra peasants in particular. What had been achieved fell far short of expectations, and this happened in spite of the two Scheduled Caste members being present in the cabinet. The situation frustrated some of the Namasudra legislators in the same way as it dissatisfied many of the Krishak Praja party dissidents. Their attack on the Fazlul Huq ministry, therefore, began within a few months and it was directed against almost every measure that it proposed to introduce. The tone of the attack clearly revealed that it was emanating from a deep sense of dissatisfaction and the resultant feelings of distrust and suspicion.⁵

The Namasudra legislators' attack on the government was not of course always because of the inadequacy of the proposed measures. Often they felt aggrieved as such measures failed to take into account the specific interests of the Namasudra community, living in districts like Bakarganj,⁶ Jessore,⁷ and Faridpur. The ministers, when questioned about such grievances, not only pleaded ignorance, but refused to make on the spot enquiries.⁸ The major complaint of these Namasudra legislators against the Debt Settlement Boards was not that they were not doing anything, but that they did not include adequate number of Scheduled Caste members even in those districts or areas where such castes formed 'the major portion of the Hindu population'. This happened despite the Minister in charge of Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness, Mukunda Behari Mullick, being himself a Namasudra.⁹ The minister in fact had nothing to do with this under-representation, as it was the local officials, beyond his control, who recommended the formation of the boards and also suggested the names of their members. Therefore, even after a change of government, in Dacca district in 1942 out of 211 Debt Settlement Boards only sixty-five had Scheduled Caste representation.¹⁰

The charges against Mullick were, however, even more serious. He had failed to ensure the appointment of an adequate number of scheduled caste candidates in his own department, in accordance with the rule of communal ratio, which stipulated that at least 15 per cent of the existing vacancies were to be filled in with scheduled caste candidates. And not only that, while appointing such candidates he preferred only his own relations or people from his own district of Khulna, neglecting the larger interests of his community. Charges of nepotism were raised in the Assembly a number of times and the minister either feebly denied them or avoided a straightforward answer.¹¹ For the second charge of course there was no conclusive evidence, but the

first one was self-evident. This was true in many other departments, although there were clear instructions, as Srish Chandra Nandi, the Minister in charge of Communications and Works department admitted in the Assembly in March 1938, that the communal ratio was to be followed in filling in the existing vacancies.¹² In general, the position of the Scheduled Castes in the sphere of public employment did not improve at all,¹³ as almost everywhere the Scheduled Caste candidates continued to be discriminated against, despite the wishes of the government.

This was partly because of certain serious gaps in the policy. But it was also due to the distorted notions of a biased bureaucracy responsible for recruitment at local level. As far as the policy went, Rasiklal Biswas pointed out in 1941 that although the Scheduled Castes constituted 20 per cent of the total population of the province, the government had reserved for them only 15 per cent of the jobs. Not only that, it was stipulated that they would be appointed only if considered 'competent' by the appointing authorities. There was no definite yardstick to judge competence, he argued. Its definition varied and depended on the persons defining it. Since there was no dearth of officers prejudiced against such castes, the claims of their candidates were often turned down arbitrarily, even though they had the required minimum qualifications.¹⁴

The allegations were certainly not baseless, as the available evidence suggests that officials had stereotyped such candidates as generally of poor standards and suitable, if at all, for only certain specific types of manual jobs. 'If looked at from the point of view of efficiency', noted a district official, the system of appointment on a communal basis 'was a most unsatisfactory' one. In the name of ensuring efficiency, he freely deviated from the government regulations. Talking about the filling up of a vacancy in the Jessore Collectorate with a Scheduled Caste candidate during his tenure as District Magistrate in 1936-37, he admits in a rather candid way: 'The Government percentage for this category [scheduled castes] in the office was 15 per cent. Our percentage, in fact, was 2 per cent. The standard of education of those who appeared before me [for interview] was poor indeed.'¹⁵ There were of course other officers who were more liberal and thought that there was 'no justification for excluding all members of the scheduled caste group' from such areas of employment as the military services, where the recruiting authorities were still prejudiced against such people. But they too had their own biased notions about the suitability of such candidates for particular jobs. One such official of the Government of Bengal thus wrote to an army

recruiting officer: 'If I were to be more precise, I should say that the Namasudras of E. Bengal (particularly Dacca & Faridpur) will do very well for the Coastal Defence Battalions, and the Rajbansis of N. Bengal (Rangpur, Dinajpur, etc.) for the Labour Battalions and as camp followers generally.'¹⁶ It was indeed such unconscious, though in some other cases deliberate, stereotyping of the Scheduled Castes as generally poor in education and suitable only for manual jobs that resulted in their under-representation in public employment. It was a problem related to the social distribution of power and a dominant public mentality which it had created and nurtured for centuries. Official policies could hardly alter this situation in a few years, and it was well beyond the ability of individual ministers to make any effective intervention.

However, the major grievance of the scheduled caste leaders against the Fazlul Huq government was that it grossly neglected the question of their education which alone would make them eligible for better jobs. In the budget of 1938-39, only a paltry sum of Rs.30,000 had been provided for the education of the scheduled castes.¹⁷ This was in sharp contrast, thought Manmohan Das, to what was being done in the Congress ruled provinces. He therefore asked for a recurring grant of Rs.500,000 for this purpose and Huq under pressure agreed that a scheme to this effect would be prepared and presented in the July (1938) session of the Assembly. But when this supplementary budget was presented in August, it disappointed the Scheduled Caste legislators once again. Not only did it fail to include any scheme for the development of education among such people, but the grant of Rs. 5 lakhs that had been provided for was not an annual grant, but only a non-recurring grant to be spent over an unspecified number of years. The 'Bengal Ministry', Das therefore burst out, 'has done nothing for the good of the Scheduled Castes up to the present time'. And the two Scheduled Caste members of the cabinet either did not have any voice or they did not take any interest in this matter or, as Rasiklal Biswas alleged, only looked after their own narrow self-interests. The premier of Bengal, as P. R. Thakur complained, had 'ceased to be any more sympathetic towards the Scheduled Castes after recruiting two Ministers from among them'. For that reason 'two-thirds of their representatives in the Assembly' now joined the Opposition. Many of them believed, at least Thakur certainly did, that 'the present Ministry . . . [was] a Muslim League Ministry in every respect . . . and the mandate of the League . . . [was] being followed by the Ministry in toto.'

It was this political tone of the attack that struck Fazlul Huq. In his opinion, what these Scheduled Caste MLAs had resorted to was nothing

but a 'condemnation for political purposes'. After all, he had done a lot of things for them: a grant of five lakhs rupees was being provided for, a special officer had been appointed to look after the education of the scheduled castes and he had 'also got ready an Advisory Committee' to advise him on this matter. So if the Scheduled Caste legislators now voted down this demand, they would lose the money. The government would not be defeated, as he would not take it as a vote of no-confidence. 'Let not any one be carried away by enthusiasm, by some manoeuvre', he warned, 'that if they can defeat this motion, Government will be defeated.'¹⁸ The government was not defeated on this occasion, nor was this particular motion. But the debate over this supplementary budget demand in August 1938 amply revealed the widening breach between the Huq ministry and the majority of the Scheduled Caste representatives in the Assembly, including some of the prominent Namasudras, who had once supported him in forming the government.

Fazlul Huq, therefore, soon took a more conciliatory stance. The 'Government is ready, has always been and will always be ready, to help [the] Scheduled Caste[s]', he declared in the Assembly on 14 March 1939.¹⁹ Already a Scheduled Caste Education Committee had been appointed with Dr W. A. Jenkins, the Director of Public Instruction, as the Chairman, Rajani Kanta Das, the Special Officer for Scheduled Caste education, as the secretary and 13 Scheduled Caste MLAs as members.²⁰ But while the long-term recommendations of the committee remained 'under consideration', those which were 'accepted' for the five lakhs rupees could hardly be expected to bring in any large-scale expansion of education among the scheduled castes.²¹ The latter's dissatisfaction also therefore persisted and came once more to the surface when the government, ignoring the more pressing problem of primary education, introduced the Secondary Education Bill in 1940. The Scheduled Castes could not support the bill, said the Namasudra leader P. R. Thakur in the Assembly, because 'their representation on the proposed Board, Executive Council, and the various Committees was absolutely inadequate and the Bill by no means could meet the educational demands of the Scheduled Castes'. Not only was representation inadequate (five in a board of fifty members), but these few members were to be nominated by the government and not independently elected by the community. These few members would therefore be the chosen people of the ministers and would 'be dominated by the strongest party in the Board, which would be obviously Muslim'.²²

Indeed, as we have noted earlier, this comparison with the Muslims had now become one of the major sources of irritation for some of the

Scheduled Caste leaders. This persisted despite such cosmetic measures as the provision for a new hostel for the Scheduled Caste students in Calcutta.²³ While Muslim education was being promoted in a variety of ways, complained Amrita Lal Mandal, another Scheduled Caste MLA, in March 1941, the legitimate claims of the Scheduled Castes were being consistently disregarded.²⁴ Even Birat Chandra Mandal, who supported the government and described the Secondary Education Bill as 'more democratic', had to concede that the Scheduled Castes had not been given adequate representation in the proposed new board, even though 'the Muhammadans and the Scheduled Castes . . . [were] sailing in the same boat so far as literacy . . . [was] concerned'.²⁵ Most of the Scheduled Caste leaders, in other words, had been disenchanted with a government that appeared to be completely under the influence of the Muslim League and only looking after the interests of the Muslim community. The government made a further concession in May 1941 by appointing a Standing Committee to advise the government on all matters relating to Scheduled Caste education. The committee included Jenkins as the Chairman, the Special Officer Rajani Kanta Das as the Secretary and nine Scheduled Caste MLAs as members, four of them being prominent Namasudra leaders. They were to be in office for one year.²⁶ During that period, however, nothing significant happened in the field of Scheduled Caste education that could mend an already ruptured political alliance.

II

This increasing distance between the Scheduled Caste leaders and the first Fazlul Huq government was clearly related to a gradually closing gap between the former and the Congress. Even before 1937-38 what these leaders were involved in was not separatist politics *per se*. They were pursuing only what they considered to be the legitimate interests of their community which they thought could be best safeguarded by distancing themselves from the Congress movement. However, these very interests, as perceived by these leaders, also dictated that their ultimate objective should be to seek integration into the political nation, after ensuring for themselves a legitimate share of power within that larger community. This the election of 1937 seemed to have accomplished for them, as the Scheduled Castes now emerged as an important power bloc in Bengal Assembly politics which none of the other groups could afford to ignore. The Congress too realised their

political importance and the first indication of this was the appointment of Radhanath Das, a Scheduled Caste MLA from Hooghly, as the Deputy Whip of its legislative party in the Bengal Assembly. Then followed other measures which sought to appropriate the Scheduled Caste movements by capitalising on their grievances against the Huq ministry.

With the death of Guruchand in March 1937, the major influence that had kept the Namasudra movement away from Congress politics was removed. Then the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, formed later that year, emerged as a new and vital link between the Congress and the Namasudra leaders. Among the latter, those who were associated with the new organisation included such prominent personalities as P. R. Thakur, Rasiklal Biswas, Jajneswar Mandal, and Jogendranath Mandal, who later became its president in 1940.²⁷ The occasion that can be regarded as a turning point in the direction towards a new political alliance was the meeting held at Albert Hall in Calcutta on 13 March 1938 to commemorate the first anniversary of Guruchand's death. It was presided over by J. C. Gupta, the Chief Whip of the Congress legislative party in Bengal and was addressed by fourteen other prominent leaders of the province, including the Congress president Subhas Chandra Bose. The latter in his speech paid glowing tributes to Guruchand and described him as 'a superman' who had 'regenerated the Hindus of Bengal by infusing new life into them'. He had 'elevated the status of the Scheduled Castes who have been able to fall in line with the caste Hindus in social and political life'.²⁸ In other words, what Bose tried to emphasise was that their upliftment had already been accomplished through the initiative and endeavours of Guruchand and therefore the moment of their integration into the social and political mainstream had also arrived.

This integration now took place at an astounding pace. On 16 March 1938, i.e., three days after the Albert Hall meeting, about twenty Scheduled Caste legislators, including a number of prominent Namasudras, assembled at the residence of Subhas's elder brother Sarat Chandra Bose and decided to co-operate with the Congress party and withdraw their support for the coalition ministry.²⁹ They formed a new legislative party, known as the Independent Scheduled Caste Party, with Jogendranath Mandal as its Secretary.³⁰ This new party decided 'to work in cooperation with the Congress and [the] Independent Praja Party [the dissident breakaway group from Huq's Krishak Praja Party] to promote the interests of the tenantry in Bengal'.³¹ But their doubts and dilemmas were not yet over and this became evident two days later (18 March)

during their meeting with Gandhi, once again at Sarat Bose's house. In the course of an hour-long discussion, Jogendranath Mandal and P. R. Thakur, the two Namasudra leaders in the delegation, expressed in no uncertain terms their lingering suspicion about the high-caste Hindu leaders of the Congress.³² But Gandhi advised them to join the Congress, as it was the only party that stood for all communities and classes.³³ Two days later, on 20 March, the All Bengal Scheduled Caste Federation (the new name for the Depressed Classes Federation founded in 1932) at its seventh annual meeting endorsed the steps taken by their legislators and resolved 'to work in co-operation with the Congress within constitutional activities'.³⁴ The process of political realignment thus set in.

The new political alliance was celebrated a week later on 26 March, when the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, in a meeting at Sraddhananda Park, presented an address of welcome to the Congress President Subhas Bose. In welcoming the 'Rashtrapati', Satyendranath Ray, the President of the League, expressed his hope that the Scheduled Caste community of the province would rally round the Congress, as under the presidentship of Bose the hopes and aspirations of Mahatma Gandhi would find a ready fulfilment and the Scheduled Caste people would be granted economic and social independence. As reported in the *Hindustan Standard*, Bose in his reply emphasised that the

Scheduled Caste people and the caste Hindus, all belonged to one community, there being no distinction whatsoever. Indians were slaves – they were a subject race, depressed, suppressed and oppressed. The whole nation was a depressed nation, Brahmins and Kayasthas being no exception to that . . . with the attainment of freedom all these inequalities would automatically disappear.

The Congress stood for social justice, he reiterated, and with the mission of ameliorating the conditions of the backward communities the Congressmen would now be visiting every corner of the country.³⁵ About a month later, in course of his Assam tour Bose repeated the same thing at Karimganj on 25 April during his interview with Balaram Sarkar, a Namasudra member of the Assam Legislative Assembly. He advised him to join the Congress, as it was the only organisation working for the removal of all social inequalities and Sarkar on his part also agreed to work with the Congress in the legislature in future.³⁶ The new alliance thus began to have its geographical spread.

However, within this new alliance the Namasudras of Bengal, being the most organised and articulate of all, occupied the most crucial

position. There was definitely an extra effort on the part of the Congress to enlist the support of this community. Since their movement revolved round the Thakur family of Orakandi, Guruchand was eulogised not only by the Congress president. Gandhi himself in a personal letter to P. R. Thakur described his grandfather as 'a great "guru"'.³⁷ But the relationship was not a smooth one, as Pramatha Ranjan also inherited his grandfather's long-standing reservations about the Congress (or Gandhian) way of removing untouchability. In a letter to Gandhi in February 1933, he had expressed his doubts whether this problem could be solved through temple entry alone. 'Unless immediate measures are taken', he thought, 'towards the educational and economic advance of the depressed classes, this evil can never be eradicated. It seems impossible to cure a disease by suppressing its symptom.' But Gandhi in his reply had emphatically argued that the problem of untouchability 'can never be solved without temple entry; and temple entry alone could accelerate the economic and educational advance of the untouchables'.³⁸

Now that the Congress was holding office in a number of provinces, the effectiveness of this Gandhian strategy could be more convincingly proved. Already in Madras, Bombay, the Central Provinces and Berar, the incumbent Congress governments had introduced temple-entry Bills in 1938-39,³⁹ along with other measures to ameliorate the conditions of the *harijans*. Gandhi, therefore, during his 18 March meeting with the Bengal Scheduled Caste MLAs, asked them to see for themselves what practical steps the different Congress ministries had been taking in this direction. Accordingly, the Bengal Congress in July sent P. R. Thakur and Radhanath Das, the Deputy Whip of the Congress legislative party, on a tour of the Congress ruled provinces.⁴⁰ The two Scheduled Caste MLAs during their three weeks' excursion visited Orissa, Madras, Mysore, Bombay, CP, Delhi, UP and Bihar, conferred *en rout* with Jinnah and Gandhi and returned to Calcutta on 28 July 1938, fully 'impressed with the progress so far achieved in the various Congress provinces'. 'We were pleased to see', they stated in a joint press communique immediately after arrival, 'that the Congress governments regard it as their duty to do all they can for the uplift of the Scheduled Castes'.⁴¹

The actual situation in these provinces might well have been different. When they assumed power in 1937 none of the Congress governments had really any coherent programme beyond only a vague concern for the untouchables, and that too because of Gandhi. Their performance in this regard during the first two years in office, as a recent commentator writes, 'was disappointing [both] to secular socialists such as Nehru and

to Untouchable leaders such as Ambedkar'.⁴² Nevertheless, our two Bengal MLAs were 'impressed', and Das predictably more than Thakur, as their minds had already been favourably cast even before they had set out on their journey. They were not satisfied with the present ministry and wanted to replace it, preferably with a Congress backed government. It was since the beginning of July, i.e., even before the two MLAs had started their tour, 'rumours had been current' that there would be 'a reconstituted Coalition Ministry dependent upon the support of the Congress'.⁴³ And there is every reason to believe that some of the Namasudra and other Scheduled Caste legislators were actively involved in this ministry making (or unmaking) project. In the first week of July, possibly two or three days after Thakur and Das had started their journey, the Namasudra leader Rasiklal Biswas issued a statement to all the Scheduled Caste members of the Assembly. The statement needs to be quoted extensively to prove our point:

Those who are in touch with the political situation in Bengal know very well that a great opportunity has come to the Scheduled Castes. If their M.L.A.s can unite and manage affairs tactfully and properly, they can hold the balance of power . . . and decide the fate of Bengal . . .

The Congress Party of Bengal is willing to set up a Ministry entirely of Muslims and of Scheduled Castes in Bengal, in the same manner as it has been done in Sind . . . Many of the M.L.A.s belonging to the Scheduled Castes know that responsible Congress leaders have already assured them in this matter . . .

If at least 25 M.L.A.s of the Scheduled Castes now join the Opposition they can easily remove the present Ministry and in the new Cabinet they can easily get 5 Ministers . . . If our Scheduled Caste M.L.A. friends lose this opportunity it may not come to the community again. It is for this advantage of holding the balance of power we insisted upon reserving seats in the legislature for the Scheduled Castes. I think the whole Scheduled Castes community should now realise the gravity of the situation and give a mandate to their representatives in the Assembly to avail of this opportunity as early as possible.⁴⁴

In other words, a few Scheduled Caste and Namasudra leaders had already realised the importance of their crucial position 'of holding the balance of power' in legislative politics and were bent on taking advantage of it. For this reason a political realignment was necessary and it had already taken place. The decision in this regard had been taken by

a handful of leaders and as it amounted to a fundamental change in their political position, it had to be justified and legitimated by showing that Congress was a better political ally than the present coalition ministry. This perhaps explains the much publicised Das-Thakur tour and the series of press statements that they issued after their return, eulogising the Congress governments in other provinces.

By the time the two Scheduled Caste MLAs returned, i.e., 28 July, a decision had already been taken in favour of a joint offensive against the present government. The meetings held and press statements issued immediately before and after this date clearly indicated that.⁴⁵ This preparatory period ultimately came to an end on 8 August 1938 when Dhananjay Ray, an Independent Namasudra MLA from Dacca, moved the first in a series of ten no-confidence motions against individual ministers of the Huq cabinet. Though Ray's motion was defeated, its interesting feature was that it was against Srish Chandra Nandi, who was a member of a backward caste (Tili), if not of a Scheduled Caste.⁴⁶ Two days later a more interesting development took place: the no-confidence motion against the Namasudra minister Mukunda Behari Mullick was moved by a fellow Namasudra leader, P. R. Thakur. It was supported by another Namasudra MLA, Jogendranath Mandal, who had earlier that day refrained from moving his own motion against Prasannadeb Raikat, the other Scheduled Caste minister in the cabinet.

By way of defending his motion, Thakur said that the progress of the co-operative movement had been 'retarded' in Bengal under the present minister. The moneylenders, because of the Bengal Agricultural Debtors' Act, have been refusing to provide credit to the agriculturists, while to replace them no alternative source of credit had been created, except a few ineffective mortgage banks. The Debt Settlement Boards, on the other hand, included 'members of the money lending classes', resulting in a denial of justice to the 'poor debtors'. Finally the minister did nothing for the Scheduled Castes: 'His position in the Cabinet has only been utilised in providing his family members, friends and relatives with honours and lucrative jobs under Government.' Therefore, 'sooner he . . . [was] removed from the Treasury Bench, the better for the Scheduled Castes and the Province of Bengal.' Mandal's critique, on the other hand, was more general in nature and more radical in tone. 'If the history of human society is the history of class struggle', he argued, 'the class to which the Ministers belong can only be interested in eliminating the toiling proletariat and the peasant poor.' And so far as the Scheduled Castes were concerned, Mullick particularly, by his 'avowed and frank nepotism', had only 'alienated the majority' of them. In his reply

however, Mullick denied all the charges levelled against him; the motion was then put to vote and lost.⁴⁷ The same thing happened to the other motions as well and the ministry was saved this time by the support of the European group in the Assembly.⁴⁸ But what this episode in the history of parliamentary politics in Bengal indicated was that at least 16 out of the 31 MLAs from among the Scheduled Castes had now switched their allegiance to Congress.⁴⁹

But even at this stage these Scheduled Caste leaders did not appear to be fully prepared for a complete merger with the Congress. A separate political existence was considered to be necessary for retaining their bargaining position within the Bengal Assembly. On 18 August 1938 the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported that in a meeting with Subhas and Sarat Bose, P.R.Thakur and Jogendranath Mandal had pointed out that the sixteen members of the Independent Scheduled Caste Party 'would maintain a separate existence in the legislature . . . [and] would not sign the Congress creed'. They would, however, 'cooperate with the Congress Party in the Legislature'.⁵⁰ One might call this political opportunism; but if so, it was only a result of the existing cross currents of parliamentary politics in Bengal.

Immediately after the no-confidence debate, Fazlul Huq made fresh endeavours to win over the disgruntled Scheduled Caste MLAs. On 24 August he convened a meeting of the members of the Coalition and the 'Scheduled Caste Parties' to consider the steps to be taken immediately and programmes to be undertaken to consolidate the position of the government.⁵¹ Soon there were rumours in Calcutta political circles that one of the two existing Scheduled Caste ministers would be dropped and be replaced by someone from the Opposition. This 'concession', it was 'confidently hoped', would have the effect of winning over the support and sympathy of those Scheduled Caste MLAs who had lately voted against the government.⁵² However, this bait of a ministerial chair was never actually offered. Nor would it appear so attractive any more. Because at least for some of the Scheduled Caste leaders, the search for a separate political identity was now definitely over. To them, an alliance with the Congress now certainly appeared to be a better option. Or we may say, they were gradually, though haltingly, moving towards a new political strategy of integration. In February 1939 some of them expressed openly their dissatisfaction at the introduction of separate election in the proposed Municipal Bill.⁵³ The position was again reiterated in May in another public meeting, which supported a joint electorate with some reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes.⁵⁴ Finally, a public announcement of the shift in political strategy was made

on 28 May 1939 at the Bengal Namasudra Conference, held at Tamluk in Midnapur district.

'In spite of a very strong opposition from the Ministerial Party with their false propaganda', as the *Hindustan Standard* reported, 'the Conference was a great success.' It was presided over by P. R. Thakur, who advised the members of his community 'to proceed with the progress of time without any complaint against the upper castes . . . [to] follow the footsteps of the enlightened castes especially in matter of education . . . [and to] join the National Congress and fight for India's freedom'. This amounted to a complete and unambiguous reversal of Guruchand's political stand. The political alienation of the grandfather, in other words, now gave way to the integrationist ideology of the grandson. But efforts at integration came from both sides. It should be mentioned that the conference was held inside a Hindu temple, the doors of which had been thrown open to the Scheduled Castes for the first time. It was addressed by the local Congress leader Satish Chandra Chakraborty. He and the other famous Midnapur Congress leader Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee also spoke at the All Bengal Scheduled Castes Workers Conference, held on the next day at the same venue. They asked the gathering to rise above the narrow limits of caste and community and to fight for freedom under the Congress flag. The meeting was presided over by Rasiklal Biswas. 'A red flag and the national flag', as the *Hindustan Standard* described the scenario, 'were flying on both sides of the President.' And the whole place was 'resounding with "Bande Mataram"'.⁵⁵ This indicated without much doubt that a great change had already taken place in the Bengal Scheduled Caste movement in general and in the Namasudra movement in particular. The sympathies of some of their leaders had tilted decisively in favour of the Congress, which was still being led by Subhas Bose.

But the Congress itself was in great crisis during this period and the crisis centred around Bose himself. Both Gandhi and the Gandhians were bent on removing him from Congress presidentship, as in the last election for the office he had achieved a convincing victory against Sitaramayya, known as the Mahatma's own candidate. It was at the AICC meeting at Calcutta in late April and early May 1939 that Bose was ultimately forced to resign and Rajendra Prasad was chosen in his place. This was followed by political squabbles within the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee [BPCC]. Eventually, the Congress Working Committee suspended Bose in July 1939 from all Congress executive positions for three years and appointed over his head an *ad hoc* BPCC.⁵⁶ With the subsequent excommunication of Sarat Bose, the

leader of the Congress legislative party in the Bengal Assembly, the split in the Bengal Congress was complete.⁵⁷ Bose and his Forward Bloc, 'supported by the Communist Party of India', now tried to organise rival volunteer groups and councils of action against the official Congress formations in the districts. Though some of the government reports talked about the 'losing popularity' of Bose brothers,⁵⁸ the available evidence indicates that it was the official Congress which was in troubled waters. The Bengali sentiments were obviously hurt by the rough treatment meted out by the Congress high command to one of their favourite leaders.⁵⁹ And this might have resulted in a loss of mass support as well. A BPCC spokesman acknowledged in October 1939 that the progress of its 'mass contact' programme 'has not uptill [sic] now been altogether satisfactory'.⁶⁰ During the following months, under a split leadership and being constantly assailed by an aggressive Hindu Mahasabha, the Congress began to lose further ground even among the Hindus of Bengal.⁶¹ And in this crisis situation the newly developing delicate relationship with the Scheduled Caste movement was certainly in jeopardy.

In August 1939 at a meeting of the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, held under the presidency of Radhanath Das, the Congress Working Committee's action against Subhas Bose came in for severe criticism and eventually a resolution was passed 'emphatically protesting' against the ban on him. The meeting also decided to extend whole-hearted support to the Forward Bloc.⁶² It was with Bose's support that the Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mandal won his election to become a Councillor of the Calcutta Corporation. He was still a Congress nationalist and was urging the members of his community to join the 'forward march of the nation'.⁶³ But as his son tells us, it was from this time and due to the Bose controversy, that his alienation from the Congress began.⁶⁴ After Subhas's arrest in July 1940 and his eventual escape from the country in January 1941, his brother Sarat Bose took fresh initiatives to revive the relationship with the Scheduled Caste leaders. In early February 1941 he organised a 'dinner party' at his house, where members of the Independent Scheduled Caste Party were invited along with some Congress members of the Assembly. After dinner, apart from Bose himself, several of the invitees spoke including P. R. Thakur and Manmohan Das from among the Scheduled Castes leaders. 'It was', as *Hindustan Standard* reported, 'a very happy social gathering.'⁶⁵ Indeed, this was the beginning of preparations for another round of offensives against the Fazlul Huq ministry. For in less than two months we find Jogendranath Mandal visiting east Bengal and in collaboration with the

local Forward Bloc groups stressing in public meetings 'the need of unity and Hindu solidarity for the greater interest of the motherland'. He condemned the 'present reactionary Ministry of Bengal' for misusing power and lauded the Congress for its 'immense sacrifice and sufferings'.⁶⁶ A fresh ministerial crisis developed within a few months of this.

When Fazlul Huq, in response to an invitation from the Governor in July 1941 joined the National Defence Council, it annoyed Jinnah as he was not consulted. As the Muslims were not given parity of seats with the Hindus, by joining this wartime committee, as Jinnah thought, they had compromised the cause of Muslim equality as embodied in the two-nation theory.⁶⁷ Thus, in August the Muslim League Working Committee asked Huq and other Muslim leaders to resign from the Council and Huq in protest resigned from both the National Defence Council and the Muslim League. In a following letter written to the party secretary on 8 September, he complained of autocratic domination of the League by a minority, challenging by implication the authority of Jinnah. However, he did not immediately want to push the matter to extremes and tried to patch matters up with the League by writing a letter of apology in November.⁶⁸

But the crisis was not so easily resolved. Huq, in a speech two years later, revealed his suspicion that ever since the middle of 1941 some of his 'colleagues in the cabinet' were 'planning to oust' him from office and that his 'dissension with Mr Jinnah' had given them an opportunity.⁶⁹ The Governor General in a telegram to the Secretary of State in December 1941 also alleged that: 'For two years or more Huq had been in secret consultation with Sarat Bose and certain Mahasabha leaders for formation of alternative Ministry'.⁷⁰ The two allegations, even if neither of them were true, certainly indicate that a cabinet change was on the cards. And this was what the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* predicted when a motion of no-confidence was tabled against Suhrawardy on 16 September 1941. The latter was saved when on that day the Deputy Speaker abruptly adjourned the House without allowing it to do any business.⁷¹ But the ministerial crisis could not be averted.

In November Huq with his supporters formed a Progressive Assembly Party, which formed an alliance with Sarat Bose and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and transformed itself into the Progressive Coalition Party. The League members of the cabinet resigned on 1 December, followed by Huq tendering the resignation of his ministry. On 3 December he formally accepted the leadership of the new party, the formation of which, he said, was 'an event unprecedented in the history

of India'. For it brought together 'diverse elements in India's national life', including within its fold forty-seven members of the Progressive Assembly Party, nineteen of the Krishak Praja Party, twenty-seven of the Forward Bloc, eleven Hindu Mahasabha members and twelve members of the Independent Scheduled Caste Party.⁷² The twenty-eight members of the official Congress led by Kiran Shankar Ray could not join, possibly because Gandhi did not want it;⁷³ but they offered conditional support. On 12 December 1941 Huq formed a new coalition ministry; Sarat Bose had been arrested the previous morning. The Hindu press welcomed the new ministry, popularly known as the Shyama-Huq ministry, with the hope that it would bring in unity among the Hindus and the Muslims of the province.⁷⁴ The Muslims, on the other hand, as Nazimuddin wrote to Jinnah, felt 'to have been let down by the Governor' and developed 'great indignation at the treachery of Mr Fazlul Huq'.⁷⁵

The Scheduled Caste organisations were also not too happy. For the new eight-member cabinet included only one Scheduled Caste minister, this time the well-known Rajbansi leader Upendranath Barman, with the charge of Forest and Excise department.⁷⁶ Within a few days the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League held a meeting, in which full support was extended to the Progressive Coalition Party. But at the same time a demand was raised for the inclusion of at least three more ministers from among the members of the Independent Scheduled Caste Assembly Party.⁷⁷ About a month later, on 15 January 1942, there was another meeting of the Scheduled Castes in Calcutta under the presidency of Upendranath Barman. The meeting again adopted a resolution demanding the inclusion of another Scheduled Caste member in the new cabinet.⁷⁸ In response to all such demands, later in that month Huq requested that the Governor let him expand the cabinet, particularly by the addition of two more ministers from among the Scheduled Castes. The Governor refused.⁷⁹ Because of Huq's gesture, the general support of the Scheduled Caste legislators for the new cabinet remained solid, although as before, this was not the position shared by all of them. Although many of their legislators across the party lines supported the Shyama - Huq ministry on different occasions,⁸⁰ a split in their movement had now become more than apparent. There was always a strong group that did not like this new integrationist trend and now being in opposition they began to organise themselves. The Scheduled Caste movement had been divided ever since its leadership became preoccupied with constitutional politics in the early 1930s. In the early 1940s, with more complexities appearing in this particular domain of politics, these leaders changed their political affiliations continually.

Some of them switched so quickly and so abruptly that at times it became difficult to keep track of their political loyalties.

III

The disunity among the 'Independent' Scheduled Caste legislators had become apparent as early as September 1937, when some of them expressed their dissatisfaction about the inadequacy of the tenancy legislation, proposed by the first Fazlul Huq ministry. But on that occasion, only two Namasudra leaders, P. R. Thakur and Jogendranath Mandal, besides the Congressites, had actually opposed the government.⁸¹ During the following months, as we have already seen, this dissident group rapidly grew in size and by August 1938, when the no-confidence motions were tabled against individual ministers in this cabinet, 16 Scheduled Caste MLAs voted in favour of the motions, while only seven voted against.⁸² Those who voted against the government, clearly did so out of dissatisfaction with the Huq ministry and more particularly with its two Scheduled Caste members, who also became targets of a mounting public attack outside the legislature.⁸³

On the other hand, these ministers had a few supporters and now, they too organised themselves and tried to display their strength in public meetings. On 14 March 1938 in Mukunda Behari's home district, the Khulna District Scheduled Caste Association held an extraordinary general meeting where resolutions were passed supporting the present ministry in Bengal.⁸⁴ A few days later on 27 March, the major offensive of this ministerial group came at a meeting of the Namasudras of Calcutta, held at the City Collegiate School premises under the presidency of Prasanna Kumar Das, the Librarian of Albert Hall. Here the Namasudra MLAs, working with the opposition, came under severe attack. Jogendranath Mandal's speech in their favour was intercepted and a resolution was moved to censure them. When the president intervened to disallow Sashi Bhushan Halder to speak in opposition to the resolution, the meeting ended up in a 'hand to hand scuffle' leading to 'complete chaos'. As the *Hindustan Standard* reported, 'the majority of the gathering' then assembled at the College Square and held a meeting with Jogendranath Mandal in the chair. A resolution was unanimously passed calling upon the Namasudra MLAs to fully support the cause of the *raiya*s and to oppose the government if necessary on this issue.⁸⁵ About four and a half months later, the no-confidence motions were moved against the ministers.

This cleavage gradually increased, as the group which rallied round Mukunda Behari Mullick and his brother Pulin Behari, continued to trudge along the same beaten path which the Scheduled Castes, or for that matter the Namasudra movement, had always trodden. Thus when Britain got involved in the Second World War, a special meeting of the Bengal Depressed Classes Association, under the presidency of Mukunda Behari, expressed loyalty to the King-Emperor and requested the Scheduled Caste community to pray for Britain's success in the war.⁸⁶ At a Scheduled Caste students' meeting in Faridpur in November 1939, Pulin Behari demanded more jobs and funds for education and tried to expose the hollowness of 'such unreal agitations as temple entry and removal of untouchability'. 'Those who want you to engage yourselves in such agitations', he cautioned the students, 'are not your friends. They want to mislead you into a blind lane away from the main road. Avoid them by all means . . .'⁸⁷ Their true friend indeed was Dr Ambedkar who was to be consulted, as the All India Adi Hindu Depressed Classes Conference held at Lucknow in February 1940 under the presidency of Mukunda Behari Mullick resolved, on all matters concerning the future constitution of India.⁸⁸ Such a constitution should not be framed, as Pulin Behari demanded in the Assembly on 2 August 1940, by a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of adult franchise. For in that case the minority communities, like the Muslims and the Scheduled Castes, would be at the mercy of the majority community, the caste Hindus.⁸⁹

However, it was this prospect of fresh discussion on the future constitution which again brought in rapid realignments within the Scheduled Caste leadership in early 1942. On 12 March the supporters of the Progressive Coalition Ministry reorganised themselves and formed a new parliamentary party, called the Progressive Scheduled Caste Assembly Party, with Hem Chandra Naskar as the leader.⁹⁰ An interesting feature of the new party was the absence of all the prominent Namasudra legislators from the position of leadership. But an even more interesting event took place ten days later on 23 March, when a parallel parliamentary party was constituted, known as the Bengal Scheduled Caste Party, with Mukunda Behari Mullick as the leader and his one-time ardent critic Rasiklal Biswas as the Whip.⁹¹ In this case the latter appears to have changed his political colours by leaving the Congress. But as the proposed Cripps Mission opened up new possibilities for constitutional concessions, the Mullick group temporarily came closer, for the first time, to the pro-Congress Federationists. On 26 March 1942 it was announced that a delegation of the Scheduled Caste MLAs would

visit Delhi to confer with Ambedkar, Rajah and other leaders regarding the representation of their case before Sir Stafford Cripps. The delegation, which was to be led by Upendranath Barman, would include Mukunda Behari Mullick and Rasiklal Biswas on the one hand and the pro-Congress Independents P. R. Thakur and Birat Mandal on the other.⁹² The 'list of visitors' who had seen Sir Cripps during his visit to India shows that no delegation of the Bengali Scheduled Castes had actually been able to meet him.⁹³ The only representation that he received from Bengal was from Srish Chandra Nandi, the President of the Intermediate and the Suppressed Castes (Hindu) Association.⁹⁴ But the Cripps mission certainly had brought about a rapprochement between the two warring factions among the Bengal Scheduled Castes, and for that matter also Namasudra, leadership. It was, however, of a very temporary nature.

During the subsequent period, groups and splinter groups continued to be formed in rapid succession. On 26 April 1942 a meeting of the Scheduled Caste people in Calcutta formed a new organisation called the Bengal Scheduled Caste League.⁹⁵ Later, on 25 October 1942, the Calcutta District Scheduled Caste Conference took place, which the Chief Minister Fazlul Huq had consented to inaugurate.⁹⁶ On this occasion the Calcutta District Scheduled Caste Federation was constituted, with the minister Upendranath Barman as the President.⁹⁷ But the common names appearing in both the two lists of office bearers really make it difficult to say who was with whom at this particular point of time. Four years ago in March 1938, the Faridpur Namasudra leader Jaineswar Mandal had best summed up the situation in a cryptic letter to the editor of the *Hindustan Standard*:

We do not find any unity amongst the representatives of the Scheduled Castes. To my mind, it seems to be due to the want of any definite ideal. Their motive of self-interest has led them away from the interests of the community for which they stand . . . Narrow communalism may for the time being organise a community, but it does not lead to ultimate good. But our communalism, so far as I see, has led to the fulfilment of the interests of a limited few⁹⁸

The situation had only gradually worsened by 1942. In 1937-38 the Namasudra leaders of the Scheduled Caste movement neglected their constituencies much less, as there was initial enthusiasm on the part of all the groups and factions to consolidate their positions. For example, during the first few months in office, Mukunda Behari Mullick attended

meetings and accepted welcome addresses at different regions, like Dacca, Munshiganj and Narail, while his brother Pulin Behari presided over the sixteenth session of the Bengal Namasudra conference held at Chandpur in April 1938.⁹⁹ On the other hand, leaders like Jogendranath Mandal sought to consolidate their political position by organising new local bodies, such as the Bakarganj District Scheduled Caste Association, which was formed in July 1937 and reorganised in April 1941, with Mandal as the president.¹⁰⁰ Meetings were also held in the interior where MLAs and local leaders discussed ways and means for the upliftment of the Namasudra community and resolutions were passed to that effect.¹⁰¹ In this regard, most remarkable were the socio-religious gatherings on occasions like the anniversary of Guruchand's death or the anniversary of Harichand Thakur's birth, which brought thousands of their devotees to Orakandi. P. R. Thakur, as the descendant of the late *gurus*, acted as the master of the ceremony on such occasions, when political matters were also discussed and resolutions were passed placing full confidence in his leadership.¹⁰²

In addition, from early 1938 the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League had promoted a mass contact programme among the Scheduled Caste peasantry of Bengal. In April it formed a propaganda sub-committee to devise ways and means to spread the Congress message among the masses; the committee included such prominent leaders as Rasiklal Biswas, Jajneswar Mandal and Radhanath Das.¹⁰³ Accordingly, Scheduled Caste leaders like Satyendranath Das held meetings in predominantly Namasudra areas and urged them to join the Congress and strengthen the fight against imperialism. The interests of the Scheduled Castes, he assured them, would be quite safe in the hands of the Congress.¹⁰⁴ In November 1938 Rasiklal Biswas, as the general secretary of the All India Depressed Classes Federation, issued a press statement which said that 'the majority of the thinking public of the Scheduled Castes have elected to adopt nationalism both as principle and policy. . . It is now necessary that the Scheduled Castes . . . should meet to chalk out a plan as to how the whole community can be brought in the right line and unity and strength can be achieved.'¹⁰⁵ For this purpose in February 1939 a Scheduled Caste Workers' Union was organised. Its objective was to bring together all Scheduled Caste associations on the same platform so that they could work collectively 'to acquire their political rights by constitutional means'. Though Jogendranath Mandal was chosen to be its first president, by May Rasiklal Biswas had replaced him in this position.¹⁰⁶ Mandal became the president of the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League in 1940.¹⁰⁷

But for all practical purposes the activities of these organisations rarely extended beyond the periphery of Calcutta or its suburbs. The Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, the All Bengal Scheduled Caste Workers' Union, the Bengal Namasudra Association – all functioned from the Calcutta residence of Ganga Prasad Sarkar at 15 Harrison Road.¹⁰⁸ The numerous notices of meetings of these bodies which appeared in the two Calcutta dailies, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the *Hindustan Standard*, indicate quite clearly that the leaders spent most of their time in the comfortable environment of metropolitan Calcutta. As a result, even local organisations like the Barisal Namasudra Association started functioning from Calcutta.¹⁰⁹ Certainly since the middle of 1939 these leaders were visiting their constituencies much less frequently and when occasionally some of them, like Rasiklal Biswas or Jogendranath Mandal, did visit the countryside 'to enquire into the conditions of the peasants', such visits became newsworthy and were reported prominently in Calcutta newspapers.¹¹⁰ A number of new organisations were also set up during this time, like the Nikhil Banga Anagrasar Hindu Mahasangha, the All Bengal Scheduled Caste Students Association, the Cossipore-Dum Dum Namasudra Samiti, the Belegghata Namasudra Yuva Sangha and the Namasudra Relief Committee. But all of them were centred in and around Calcutta.¹¹¹ In other words, by this time the organised Scheduled Caste movement, or for that matter even the organisations of the Namasudras, which were at one time primarily based in eastern Bengal, had become more or less Calcutta centred.

These movements were now being controlled by an ambitious urban middle-class leadership, which displayed more interest in parliamentary politics than in mass mobilisation. This becomes apparent when we look at their agenda. In the Assembly, as we have already noted, such peasant issues as the tenancy legislation, debt settlement boards, agricultural loans or village reconstruction attracted relatively less of their attention than the other two more important issues of proportional representation in public employment and special grants for education. Even when they discussed peasant issues, they often raised such high-sounding radical demands that they appeared more to be playing to the gallery than expressing any real concern for the toiling poor. Outside the Assembly their preoccupation with the twin issues of employment and education was quite obvious. For example, all the resolutions adopted at the Tamluk Namasudra Conference of 1939 were related to these two issues and none mentioned any peasant problem. The workers' meeting that followed, however, raised a few important peasant demands as the fixation of minimum price for rice and jute and the abolition of the

zamindari system and the Permanent Settlement.¹¹² But this deviation was only due to the efforts its president Rasiklal Biswas, who was raising the same demands in the Assembly. Besides these, the other thing that these leaders discussed most was the 'present political situation', which meant nothing else but party alignments in the Assembly and the strategy that they might follow to reap maximum benefit out of it.¹¹³ As a result, these leaders were gradually alienated from their peasant followers. When sometimes they went back to the villages, as a Namasudra leader wrote of his experience as early as 1929, the peasants preferred to maintain a distance from them, hesitated to sit with them and considered them to be the members of the domineering *bhadralok* community.¹¹⁴ We shall discuss in the next chapter this question of mass consciousness among the Namasudra peasants in greater detail. Now, it is essential to look at how these leaders were manoeuvring within the complex political scenario of Bengal in the troubled days of 1942-43.

IV

The Scheduled Caste legislators soon became dissatisfied with the Shyama-Huq ministry as well, and the disaffection revolved round the twin issues of education and employment. The budget for 1942-43 had provided only for a recurring grant of Rs.150,000 for the education of the Scheduled Castes, which even the Congress leader Dhiren Datta considered to be totally inadequate. Madhusudan Sarkar demanded straight away a recurring grant of five lakhs rupees for this purpose. 'Communal harmony', he warned the government, was 'possible only when all sections of the people have fair dealings'.¹¹⁵ Yet, despite such warnings, the budget allocation did not increase. Within a few days a more critical issue arose and that was the communal ratio in public employment.

On 23 March 1942 Anukul Chandra Das proposed an amendment to the Bengal Services Recruitment (Communal Ratio) Rules, 1940. It suggested that not only 25 per cent (instead of existing 15 per cent) of all vacancies should be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, but if qualified candidates from such groups were not available in sufficient number in any particular year, the vacancies then would remain unfilled until such candidates were available. In other words, under no circumstances were the vacancies reserved for the Scheduled Castes to be filled in by non-Scheduled Caste candidates. This was to rectify an old defect in the recruitment rules which, as we have already noted, the biased

bureaucrats often misused to the disadvantage of the Scheduled Caste candidates. But now, as the Rajbansi leader Kshetranath Singha explained, there was a great expectation of justice:

Formerly, the majority of the Scheduled Caste members of this House were on the opposition and the Hon'ble the Chief Minister used to tell us then that because we were on the Opposition he could not do anything for us. But now that we are on this side of the House – on the side of the Government – we do not know what we are getting from this Government . . . we want to support the Government, but we must get our share of the just rights . . .¹¹⁶

The resolution proposed and supported by two members of the Progressive Scheduled Caste Assembly Party also received full approbation of Rasiklal Biswas, the Whip of the Bengal Scheduled Caste League, which had been formed earlier on that same day. But a serious objection was raised by the leader of the Congress legislature party, Dr Nalinaksha Sanyal, though his deputy Dhiren Datta had supported the resolution in his personal capacity. The 'Congress would not stop short of any measure', Sanyal assured the Scheduled Caste legislators, 'to win their love and sympathy and their affection and co-operation in the fight for Indian freedom'. But this amendment, he warned, would have the effect of 'drawing one section against another section of the same community or one group against another' and would 'stultify our aspirations for national freedom'. The Chief Minister also considered the Scheduled Castes to be an integral part of the Hindu community and when he requested them 'not to press this motion at this moment' and promised to look into the matter, Das withdrew his resolution.¹¹⁷ But no concrete measure followed and after six months Rasiklal Biswas had to raise the same complaint again on the floor of the Assembly.¹¹⁸

However, before this disaffection of the Scheduled Caste leaders could go any further, the country was caught in the storm of the Quit India movement. In Bombay on 8 August 1942 the Congress Working Committee in order to vindicate 'India's inalienable right to freedom', resolved to start 'a mass struggle on non-violent lines . . . under the leadership of Gandhiji'.¹¹⁹ The same day in his 'do or die' speech Gandhi added an extra mood of militancy. The following morning he was arrested along with other prominent leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Mahadeb Desai. In his last message Gandhi reiterated the same militant appeal: 'There is no compromise on the demand for freedom. Freedom first, and then only the rest.'¹²⁰ In its instructions to

the provincial committees, the AICC repeated the same urgent tone: 'This is our final struggle. If all do their duty the struggle should finish in two month's [sic] time . . . The struggle will include all activities that non-violent mass struggle can include.' It should involve the 'teeming millions that inhabit the 700,000 villages', who would 'when time comes, withhold payment of all revenue to the Government'. Where the *zamindari* system prevailed, the *zamindars* could be paid their share of revenue, provided they threw their lot with the people and refused to co-operate with the Government.¹²¹ The Bengal Congress also emphasised accordingly that the revolt should take place 'simultaneously' in cities and in the villages. If this could be done, then within four weeks, it was hoped, the administrative machinery throughout India would collapse.¹²²

However, in spite of this emphasis on rural participation, the movement that immediately began was predominantly urban, spear-headed by the students, and was most effective in Calcutta and Dacca. Beyond these two larger cities, other smaller towns affected in eastern Bengal during the first ten days were Mymensingh, Serajganj, Jessore, Narail, Khulna, Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Faridpur, and Madaripur – all within the Namasudra inhabitation zone. But everywhere the principal participants were reported to be students, thus precluding the possibility of Namasudra peasant participation.¹²³ From the end of August special efforts were made to mobilise the countryside, as numerous *hartals*, meetings and processions were organised in the interior of each district, including Jessore, Khulna, Dacca, Faridpur and Bakarganj.¹²⁴ As a result, a panicky Bengal Government acknowledged in early November that 'the Congress has been able to establish a widespread and fairly well-coordinated organisation parallel to Government's.'¹²⁵ But this was true more in Midnapur than elsewhere, as from October until the end of the year, there was a marked decline in mass contact endeavours and more emphasis on the so-called revolutionary activities. Even in the Congress reports for the last three months of the year nothing was reported from any of the eastern Bengal districts that could indicate the involvement of the ordinary villagers. The only exceptions were the two stray incidents in Bakarganj;¹²⁶ but even this district was on the whole quiet. What F. O. Bell, the then District Magistrate of Bakarganj writes in his memoir about the Quit India movement in his district is worth noting in this context:

It may occasion surprise, but I do not remember very much of significance. There was some procession in Barisal town; . . . There was some cutting of telegraph wires in the country and

reports of strikes at 'bhadralok' High Schools in the North of the District. There was some picketing of the Broja Mohan College in Barisal, but I cannot remember any serious disruption.¹²⁷

This description certainly does not indicate any large-scale participation by the Namasudras, who constituted the majority of the Hindu peasantry of the district of Bakarganj. By the beginning of 1943 the movement to a large extent had run out of steam and this was acknowledged even in the Congress leaflets and circulars. The government's bi-weekly reports also indicated that the Congress movement during the first quarter of the year was confined mainly to Calcutta and beyond it to the district of Midnapur.¹²⁸ Therefore, Namasudra participation in this Congress mass movement, as on the two earlier occasions, remained conspicuous by its absence. This did not mean, however, that as a community they were anti-nationalist or pro-British, as a number of their leaders made no secret of their sympathies for the spirit of Quit India.

The Congress movement, on the other hand, created a crisis for the Progressive Coalition ministry. Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the Finance Minister and the leader of the Nationalist Party expressed immediately his disagreement with the repressive policy initiated by the Government of India and decided to tender his resignation unless that policy was revised. Similarly, in a meeting of the Progressive Assembly Party on 13 August two other ministers, Santosh Kumar Basu and Pramatha Nath Banerjee, expressed their intention to resign. On 17 August the Krishak Praja Assembly Party also adopted a resolution calling upon its leader Shamsuddin Ahmed to tender his resignation in view of the party's disagreement with the policy of the Government of India. At a meeting of the Progressive Coalition Party on 19 August the crisis was temporarily averted as unanimity was achieved on the point that 'whatever might be the decision of the individual ministers, the Progressive Coalition Party would remain intact and the party would continue to give its whole hearted support to its leader . . . Mr A. K. Fazlul Huq'.¹²⁹

But Huq himself was in a serious moral dilemma. He was not in a mood to condemn the movement and support the repressive policy, as demanded of him by the Muslim League and the European group in the Assembly. Yet he was at the helm of the government which the Quit India movement was directed against. He was immensely embarrassed when Mukherjee finally resigned in November and alleged that the Bengal government was actually being run by the Governor and the civil

servants. The allegation was unfortunately true, although the Chief Minister had repeatedly tried to resist it.¹³⁰ This made him unpopular with the Governor who ultimately pulled him down unceremoniously, and to some extent by deceit, in March 1943.¹³¹ On 31 March the Governor himself took over the administration of the province under the special provision of Article 93 of the Constitution Act. On 13 April, instead of forming an all parties cabinet which the Governor had previously promised, Sir Nazimuddin, the leader of the Muslim League was invited to form a new ministry.¹³² Some people, however, refused to call it 'a real Muslim League Ministry', as the thirteen member cabinet included six Hindu members, three of whom belonged to the Scheduled Castes.¹³³ The *Hindustan Standard* described it as 'the illegitimate offspring of a League-European Misalliance', while according to *Amrita Bazar Patrika* it was 'neither Hindu nor Muslim', but a custodian of European vested interests.¹³⁴

What was really interesting about the Nazimuddin ministry was the inclusion of three Scheduled Caste ministers, two of them being Namasudras. Jogendranath Mandal was put in charge of the Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness and Pulin Behari Mullick the Publicity department. The other member was the Rajbansi leader Premhari Barma who was put in charge of Forest and Excise department. As for Scheduled Caste representation in any Bengal ministry, the number was the highest so far. In addition, Mukunda Behari Mullick became the Deputy Leader of the Coalition. This indicates beyond doubt the importance of the Scheduled Caste group in the parliamentary politics of the province. But equally important was the great schism and the consequent shifts in political loyalties that took place in this movement during the crucial years of 1942-43. Three distinct groups among the Scheduled Castes, and also among the Namasudra, leaders can be identified around this period: the Congress-nationalist Independents, who rallied round the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League; the Mullick group which had organised itself as the Bengal Scheduled Caste Party; and the others brought together by Jogendranath Mandal under the banner of the Bengal Scheduled Caste League. What happened during 1943 was some defection from the first group to the other two, which gradually coalesced and became the supporter of the Nazimuddin ministry. The Namasudra leaders, or for that matter the entire Scheduled Caste leadership, was now clearly divided into two factions.

What contributed to the growing Scheduled Caste defection from the Congress at this juncture is a matter of conjecture. The Subhas Bose

controversy, as mentioned earlier, had already alienated some Namasudra leaders like Jogendranath Mandal, who formed his Bengal Scheduled Caste League in April 1942. But the new party retained its nationalist stand even at the beginning of the Quit India movement, as in September 1942 it condemned the arrest of Gandhi and other Congress leaders.¹³⁵ What might have further alienated this group was the vilification campaign that the Bengal Congress started against Ambedkar during this time. A leaflet published by the BPCC in December 1942 described him as someone whom the British had made leader of the untouchables. In free India, it cautioned, the activities of all such men would be reviewed to find out whether they had done good to the country or caused harm to it by word or action.¹³⁶ When Ambedkar criticised the Congress for rejecting the Cripps' offer, the Hindu nationalist press in Bengal described him with such derogatory epithets as the 'spoilt child of British Imperialism', an 'apologist of the British Government' or the 'self-constituted leader of the Scheduled Castes'.¹³⁷ The damaging effect of this exuberance could not be neutralised by such palliatives as the publication of a regular Bengali version of *Harijan* from August 1942.¹³⁸ Coupled with the growing disaffection against the Progressive Coalition ministry, this motivated the Mullick and the Mandal groups to join hands with the Muslim League and support the Nazimuddin ministry. Among the Independent Scheduled Caste legislators, the new ministry secured the support of as many as twenty, while only eight were on the opposition.¹³⁹ Two months after the formation of the new ministry in May 1943, Jogendranath Mandal took the initiative to establish the Bengal branch of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation, which Ambedkar had founded the previous year. While Mandal became its first president, Manmohan Das of Mymensingh and the Rajbansi leader Shyama Prasad Barman of Dinajpur became the joint secretaries.¹⁴⁰ The organisation began to function from the Calcutta residence of Rasiklal Biswas,¹⁴¹ who was a radical Congressite only a couple of years earlier.

The major crisis that the new ministry had to face immediately was that of food shortage and the resultant catastrophe of the Bengal famine of 1943, which even the then Deputy Secretary in the Food department of the Government of India later acknowledged to be 'a man-made famine'. One of the worst affected areas, he mentions, was eastern Bengal where the winter harvest had been inadequate due to the denial policy pursued by the government.¹⁴² As one study shows, besides Midnapur, the worst famine effects could be found in east Bengal in the moribund delta portions of Dacca, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Bakarganj, Tippera and Noakhali. And here the lower caste population, being in general poor,

suffered most.¹⁴³ One could therefore easily imagine how the Namasudras of eastern Bengal must have suffered during this period of artificial food scarcity that took such a large toll of human life in Bengal. Yet, their representative in the Assembly, amidst applause from the European and the Muslim League benches, continued to offer full-throated defence to the government which had grossly neglected its duties. 'Much has been said', declared Mukunda Behari Mullick in the Bengal Assembly on 14 July 1943, 'about the shortage of food grains, specially of rice in Bengal and suggestion has been made that it should be declared a famine area. I do not know', he exclaimed, 'how a declaration of that character will solve the difficulty.' The recent rises in the price of rice, he argued, affected only the middle classes and the landless labourers, who were 'following some sort of parasitic occupation depending on other for their maintenance'. Such high prices could not be considered as 'an unmixed evil', as he 'had reports from many places where the agriculturists . . . [had] utilised these high prices in paying up their dues to the landlord up to the last farthing and also in clearing up their old debts to their *mahajans*'. There was no need to worry about the recent hikes in the price of foodstuff, he insisted, as it 'must be of a temporary character'.¹⁴⁴

Nothing indeed could be further from the reality of economic situation in Bengal during the tragic year of 1943. Although the landless labourers were the worst sufferers, the small peasant economy was ruined as well, with 600,000 tenants losing their holdings in a single year of the famine, which cost nearly one and a half to three million lives.¹⁴⁵ Yet in September, i.e., during the height of the famine, Mullick once again came out in defence of the government. 'I do not belittle or minimise the seriousness of the present situation', he said by way of opposing the resolutions tabled for censuring the ministry. 'But if what has been said here and outside that people are dying in hundreds, thousands and lakhs is at all correct, then the whole of the sixty millions of people of Bengal would have ceased to exist by now'. The government, he argued, had done everything possible to alleviate the situation and even the appointment of the Ispahani & Co., one of the business houses owned by the supporters of the Muslim League, as the sole government agent for procurement of foodstuffs was justified. The debate on food shortage, in his opinion, was therefore nothing but political propaganda.¹⁴⁶ Even such a spirited defence, however, could not save the Nazimuddin ministry, which became immensely unpopular because of its mishandling of the famine.¹⁴⁷ The debates in the Assembly particularly on the charges of corruption and bribery against the ministry, further agitated

the politically conscious public opinion. The formation of an all-party ministry in Assam with the backing of the Congress also led many people in Bengal to hope for a similar cabinet in the early months of 1945.¹⁴⁸ The downfall actually came on 28 March, and on 30 March the Governor once again took upon himself the administration of Bengal under Article 93 of the Constitution Act. Now instead of only eight, more Independent Scheduled Caste MLAs were on the side of the opposition.¹⁴⁹

The schism within the Scheduled Caste and for that matter the Namasudra movement had developed even further during this period. The Ambedkarite politics had already taken a distinct line, as in September 1944 at a meeting in Madras the Working Committee of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation had resolved that the Scheduled Castes 'were a distinct and separate element in the national life of India'.¹⁵⁰ His followers in Bengal organised in April 1945 their first provincial conference at Gopalganj in the district of Faridpur. Here in his presidential address, the Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mandal declared that the 'first and foremost aim' of the Bengal branch of the Federation would be to establish 'the separate political identity' of the Scheduled Castes. The Muslim League, he argued, was their best friend, as its leader 'Quaid-i-Azam Mr Jinnah would never sacrifice the legitimate interests of the Scheduled Castes and join hands with Mr Gandhi or the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha', as did many of the Scheduled Caste leaders during the last ministerial crisis.¹⁵¹ But Mandal, at this juncture, was certainly not speaking for the entire Namasudra community and much less for the other Scheduled Castes. Many of their important leaders had decided to boycott this conference which, according to one account, only three out of thirty-one Scheduled Caste MLAs of Bengal had attended. Black flag demonstrations were arranged at Howrah and Khulna, the constituencies of Pulin Behari and Mukunda Behari Mullick respectively. Even Jogendranath Mandal, it is reported, was greeted with black flags, broomsticks and black earthen pots at several places between Khulna and Gopalganj. Ambedkar was probably aware of the situation and therefore decided not to come to inaugurate the conference as scheduled. His programme was cancelled at the very last moment on the pretext that his presence in Delhi at that time was essential.¹⁵² This was taken as a victory for Mandal's adversaries, and the rift in the leadership continued to increase in this way.¹⁵³ However, at this point the integrationist stand appears to have achieved a majority position within the Scheduled Caste movement of Bengal.

During its last two years, the Bengal Scheduled Caste Federation under the stewardship of Jogendranath Mandal had tried spread its tentacles far and wide by establishing local units at the district, subdivision, *thana* and union levels. Yet its distance from the average Scheduled Caste peasantry does not appear to have been narrowed. Of the seven major demands of the Federation, as put forth by Mandal at the first provincial conference, only one had any relevance to peasant interests, while the rest dealt with either institutional concessions or constitutional rights.¹⁵⁴ This distance was amply reflected in the results of the election of 1946, in which the Scheduled Caste Federation contested seven reserved and one unreserved seats and won in only one reserved seat and that too by its president Jogendranath Mandal, who had lost in two other constituencies, one reserved and the other unreserved. The Federation's close associate the Kshatriya Samiti of the Rajbansis had contested five reserved seats and won in only one. Mukunda Behari Mullick won as an Independent candidate from his home constituency in Khulna, where his other compatriot Rasiklal Biswas was defeated. By contrast, Congress Scheduled Caste candidates won in twenty-four reserved seats (out of a total of thirty). Prasannadeb Raikat (Rajbansi) and P. R. Thakur won the election as Independent candidates,¹⁵⁵ but later both of them joined the Congress. The 1946 election results thus clearly showed that there had been a complete reversal of the 1937 situation, when among thirty-two elected Scheduled Caste candidates only seven had Congress affiliation. Now the Congress had effectively appropriated the Scheduled Caste movement, and for that matter the Namasudra movement as well. The separatist strand among the Namasudra and the other Scheduled Castes leaders had been totally marginalised, and in view of the extended franchise we may also take the election results to be an index of at least the middle-class mind among these communities. In the Rajbansi-dominated Dinajpur Scheduled Caste reserved constituency, Rup Narayan Roy, a Communist candidate had won. This indicated yet another trend within the Scheduled Caste politics, which we shall discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

V

In the new Assembly in Bengal the Muslim League emerged as the single largest party and formed a ministry under H. S. Suhrawardy. His eight-member cabinet included just one Hindu and that was

Jogendranath Mandal, the only representative of the Scheduled Caste Federation who had won in the last election. This electoral débâcle throughout India proved to be disastrous for the Federation when the election to the Constituent Assembly approached. Even Ambedkar found it difficult to contest the election from his home state of Maharashtra and depended instead on his Namasudra friends in Bengal, mainly Mandal and Mullick.¹⁵⁶ At this stage, he also seemed to have been in the good books of the Muslim League, as he was supporting its Pakistan demand.¹⁵⁷ The book which he had published back in 1940, advocating the creation of Pakistan as the only appropriate solution to the Hindu-Muslim problem, had run into its third edition by 1946, and even Jinnah was referring to it as an authentic statement of what Pakistan meant.¹⁵⁸ But the results of the election to the Constituent Assembly completed the marginalisation of the Federation in Bengal. Of the six Scheduled Caste candidates elected from this province, there was only one representative of the Scheduled Caste Federation and that was Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who remained incidentally the sole representative of his organisation in the whole Constituent Assembly. The others, as one could expect, given the composition of the Bengal Assembly, were all Congress nominees and they included such prominent names as Asutosh Mullick, Hem Chandra Naskar, Prasanna Raikat, Dhananjay Ray and P. R. Thakur, the last two being Namasudras.¹⁵⁹ Among the defeated candidates were the Rajbansi leader Premhari Barma, and the Namasudra leaders Jogendranath Mandal and Mukunda Behari Mullick.¹⁶⁰

The Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 made Mandal and Mullick more unpopular in Bengal. On 19 September Dharendra Nath Datta of the Congress brought in the Bengal Assembly a motion of no-confidence against the Suhrawardy ministry for not being able to cope with the recent communal violence. The motion was ultimately lost by eighty-seven to one hundred and thirty-one votes. But the remarkable thing was that altogether five Hindu members had voted against the motion and all of them were members of the Scheduled Castes. Of them Haran Chandra Barman and Bhola Nath Biswas had evidently crossed the floor by defecting from the Congress. The other three were Jogendranath Mandal, Mukunda Behari Mullick and their Rajbansi friend Nagendra Narayan Ray of the Kshatriya Samiti.¹⁶¹ These five MLAs had voted according to their own political preferences, but this outraged the political opinion of the Bengal Scheduled Castes. The wrath fell mainly on Mandal, as he remained the only non-Muslim member in the Suhrawardy ministry. Already in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* the 'Riot

Victims' Open Letter to Mr. Jogendra Mandal' had appeared on 4 September. Some portions of it vividly conveyed the general sentiments:

The fate of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal goes along with that of the Caste Hindus in a riot and they have suffered no less than the Caste Hindus Hundreds of Scheduled Castes have been killed, hundreds wounded and hundreds of their houses and bustees have been looted and set fire to. It is not the Muslim League . . . but either the Hindu organisations or the Congress that have rescued these pitiful persons from the impending atrocities and horrible hooliganism of the Muslim Leaguers. The riot of August 16 have compelled the Scheduled Castes of Bengal along with others to lose even the bit of faith they had in the Muslim League Ministry and its Government which are wholly responsible for the massacre of so many thousands of men, women and children . . .

. . . under these circumstances we as your friends and followers hope that you would in no time cut off all connection with the League Ministry by tendering resignation . . . and thus regain the sympathy and support of all.¹⁶²

What the macabre experience of 1946 had in fact reinforced among the Bengal Scheduled Castes was a growing sense of Hindu identity which the communally charged general political atmosphere of the province during this time had definitely contributed to.¹⁶³ Another letter from the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Depressed Classes League to the editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, published on 29 September, makes this mood amply clear. It speaks of a 'secret conspiracy' between the Muslim League and 'Dr Ambedkar's followers' which led to Jogendranath Mandal issuing an appeal to the Scheduled Castes of Calcutta to join the celebrations of the Muslim League's Direct Action Day on 16 August. The celebrations ultimately sparked off the riot, in which more than a thousand Scheduled Caste Hindus were killed. But 'neither the self-made leaders of the Bengal Scheduled Caste Federation nor their supreme leader Dr Ambedkar did speak a single word against this outrage by the League hooligans upon the depressed classes.' On the other hand, a 'large number of their hapless people were rescued . . . by Congress, Marwari Relief Society, Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha and other benevolent organisations'. Some of the followers of Dr Ambedkar, the letter further alleged, who had joined the League procession on 16 August were spared due to their wearing League badges. This perceived alliance with the League had very dangerous political implications. At a

meeting in Bombay, Feroz Khan Noon had invited Ambedkar to embrace Islam and join the Muslim League with depressed classes. It was against such a possibility that the letter issued a warning: 'Dr Ambedkar should know that he is not the leader of the Depressed Classes of India. The Scheduled Castes are Hindus first and Hindus last and none of them are foolish enough to give up their ancestral religion.'¹⁶⁴ This Hinduisation of their social identity was indeed another aspect of the integrationist attitudes of the Bengal Namasudras and other Scheduled Castes in this period, and this affected equally the Namasudra peasantry as well, a point which we shall return to in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, the marginalisation of the Scheduled Caste Federation, which was looking for a separate political identity for the Scheduled Castes, had become so apparent that even the Government refused to recognise it as a legitimate interest group. The Cabinet Mission made it clear by declaring that for electoral purposes it was 'sufficient to recognise only three main communities in India: General, Muslim and Sikh, the "General" community including all persons who are not Muslims or Sikhs'.¹⁶⁵ To this the Working Committee of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation reacted vehemently and threatened to resort to direct action if the wrong done to them by the Cabinet Mission was not rectified immediately.¹⁶⁶ Their claim to be regarded as a separate minority community was supported by the Muslim League, while Jinnah continued to argue that the Congress did 'not represent any other community except the caste Hindus'.¹⁶⁷ But such claims failed to convince Sir Stafford Cripps who argued in the House of Commons on 18 July that 'at the last Provincial elections Congress made practically a clean sweep of the whole of the Depressed Class constituencies . . . Dr Ambedkar's organisation . . . had failed in the elections and we could not artificially restore its position'.¹⁶⁸ Winding up the debate, Albert Alexander, the other member of the Mission, said that his last three months' experience demonstrated that 'the majority of the depressed classes were with the Congress and behind the Congress'.¹⁶⁹ The Secretary of State, Lord Pethick-Lawrence therefore had no doubt that the 'Depressed Classes will, of course, have their full representation [in the constitution-making body] through the Congress affiliated organisation . . .'.¹⁷⁰ In the Interim Government that followed, the six Congress nominees in a cabinet of fourteen, included Jagjivan Ram to represent the Scheduled Castes.¹⁷¹ The All India Scheduled Caste Federation, however, did not consider him to be a 'true representative' of their community.¹⁷²

The statements of Cripps and Alexander infuriated the Federation leaders. Dewan Bahadur N. Shivaraj, in a statement on 20 July called it a 'crime', a 'conspiracy', a 'stabbing . . . in the back', covered by a misstatement of facts aimed at 'misleading the British Parliament and the British public'.¹⁷³ The General Secretary of the Federation, P. N. Rajbhoj described the Cabinet Mission proposals as 'the direct result of Congress machinations'. Their major aim now was to disprove the claim that Congress represented the majority of the Scheduled Castes – a claim that threatened to derecognise them as a separate minority community entitled to special rights. Already on 4 June the Working Committee of the Federation had decided to launch 'a passive resistance movement' to save themselves from 'the impending catastrophe'.¹⁷⁴ Then in mid-July on an experimental basis a *satyagraha* movement was launched at Poona as 'a protest', as Ambedkar put it, 'against the breaking of every sort of promise given to the Scheduled Castes by the British Government during the last 20 years'. The struggle would continue and spread to the whole of India, he threatened, if the Scheduled Castes were not recognised as 'a minority entitled to protection and safeguard in the constitution.' It would take the same form as the August disturbances organised by the Congress.¹⁷⁵

The movement indeed soon spread to Lucknow and though originally intended to be against the Cabinet Mission's proposals, it was now directed also against the Congress. Ambedkar at this stage also insisted on terminating the Poona Pact, which he thought had disfranchised the Scheduled Castes and had led the British Government to believe that they could have full representation through the Congress.¹⁷⁶ Crucial political support also came from Jinnah who sympathised with the 'strong feeling and strong grievance' of the Scheduled Castes who were 'offering Satyagraha and going to jail'.¹⁷⁷ But in spite of that, the movement had to be suspended after a fortnight,¹⁷⁸ which suggests that either the Federation did not have sufficient organisational infrastructure to conduct a popular agitation or it simply lacked mass support. Gandhi around the same time once again reiterated his position in *Harijan* that the untouchables were not a minority but an integral part of the Hindu community and that their position in the future constitution of India would be the same as that of the caste Hindus.¹⁷⁹ Such statements might have also undercut the support base of the Federation.

In any case the agitation had failed to affect Bengal, where most of the Scheduled Caste leaders, and presumably also their followers, had developed a faith in the Congress and the Gandhian promise of integration. In January 1946 Gandhi was in Calcutta where he explained

his eighteen-point constructive programme that attached first priority to communal amity and removal of untouchability.¹⁸⁰ Along with this, in the countryside the local Gandhiite leaders, like Suresh Chandra Gupta, organised mass inter-caste dinners in such Namasudra dominated areas as the district of Barisal.¹⁸¹ Such gestures, even though symbolic, had an obvious positive impact on the local Scheduled Caste leaders as well as the masses.¹⁸² But the Federationists continued their alliance with the Muslim League which ultimately bore fruit in October 1946 when Jinnah nominated Jogendranath Mandal to the Interim Ministry as the League's representative from Bengal. It is difficult to explain this selection. As surmised by some, it was either to marginalise Suhrawardy and the other Bengal League leaders who might have posed a threat to Jinnah's leadership; or it was a 'counter-move' against the Congress selecting a Muslim among its nominees for the Interim Government. But whatever might have been the reasons, Mandal's association with Jinnah and the League isolated him further, as the nationalist press raised a furore over his selection.¹⁸³ At this stage, he was representing beyond doubt a minority position within the Scheduled Caste politics of Bengal. Around June 1947 organised voices were raised once again all over India for condemning the Poona Pact, described as a 'political fraud', and for criticising Gandhi's Harijan movement as a cunning 'political move'. Representations to this effect were sent to the Government of India by a number of Scheduled Caste organisations from various parts of the country, but there was none from Bengal.¹⁸⁴ And finally this particular politics lost its meaning when the Bombay Congress legislature party nominated Ambedkar to the Constituent Assembly in a by-election on 22 July 1947, leading subsequently to his selection as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of India's constitution and eventually to his inclusion as the Law Minister in independent India's first government.¹⁸⁵ The appropriation of the Scheduled Caste politics by the Congress was now complete, even though it appeared to be effective more at the apex than at the bottom.

Thus during the 1940s the majority of the Namasudra leaders, along with their other Scheduled Caste colleagues, conveniently integrated into the dominant political structure in the country, though until 1937-38 they had laboured consistently to emphasise the distinctiveness of their social and political identity and had maintained their distance from the Congress. This was also perhaps a logical culmination of their movement which, though initially alienated from the nationalists, was not strictly separatist in its goals, despite frequently used separatist rhetoric. The educated Namasudra middle class, socially and culturally conditioned as

they were, could never imagine their ultimate and complete separation from either the Hindu community or from the larger political nation, and the Congress could therefore easily co-opt their dissent by accommodating the aspirations of the leadership. The Namasudra peasantry at this juncture also showed remarkable signs of integration; but this integrationism at the bottom, as we shall see in the next chapter, had an altogether different logic and much too varied expressions.

Chapter 7

From Alienation to Integration, 1937-1947: The Peasants

I

While the Namasudra leadership since 1937 was finding it more convenient to align with the Congress, what the Namasudra and other Scheduled Caste peasants were doing is unclear because of the absence of any direct evidence. There is, of course, no reason to believe that they had exhausted their spirit of protest against the inequities of Hindu society or had given up their hatred for those who perpetrated them. For example, in mid-1937 the Namasudra peasants in village Simulghar in Habiganj subdivision of Sylhet district began a prolonged struggle to win their rights to put on shoes in the presence of caste Hindus. The movement that went on for not less than twelve months, lapsed into violence on several occasions and was settled amicably at the end, with the caste Hindus conceding their demand.¹ Similarly, the traditional ill-feelings between the Kayasthas and the Namasudras continued in Faridpur, where in Hatiara in Kasiani Police Station trouble broke out again in early 1943, resulting in the arrest of some of the Namasudra 'ring leaders'.² But while these movements were extremely localised and sporadic, there is enough indication to suggest that at a more general level the Namasudra masses at this stage were developing a greater identification with the Hindu community and this Hinduisation was gradually overshadowing their caste identity. True, most of the Namasudra peasants in eastern Bengal adhered to the Vaishnavite Matua sect, which its preceptors Harichand and Guruchand had visualised as a religion of protest against orthodox Hinduism. But gradually the sect and its belief system absorbed many elements of established Hinduism or of the more orthodox trends within the *Bhakti* tradition and thus lost much of its distinctiveness as well as its subversive edge.

This element of conformism or selective absorption of symbols or ideas from the elite culture was observable in many aspects of latter-day Matua social life, most particularly in ideas governing family organisation and the status of women. As the songs of the sect composed at a later period indicate, the structure of the family in Matua philosophy gradually came to be conceptualised in terms of the notions of patriarchy. In traditional Hindu extended families, relations were organised according to age, generation and gender into a hierarchised structure of obedience, with the lowest position, in terms of rights and entitlement to resources, being assigned to women, who were only expected to obey their husbands.³ Such notions of hierarchy in family relations were derived no doubt from the ideology of hierarchy that determined the wider Hindu social structure, which the Matua sect had once sought to defy. Yet, gradually the same notions began to influence Matua perceptions and they began to visualise families where elders or *gurujan* enjoyed the position of privilege, and women were only expected to serve others and obey their husbands.⁴ The ideal chaste woman was she who worshipped the feet of her husband and for her no other form of worship was necessary to attain salvation.⁵ This was quite in contrast to the early liberalism of the sect which initially allowed women equal rights to participate in its congregational religious life. Not only that, women also came to be regarded as obstacles in the path of salvation,⁶ a stereotype which Guruchand had once denounced so severely as an upper caste Vedantic distortion (see Chapter 2). As the Namasudras moved up in social scale, or aspired to do so, they felt compelled to adopt the orthodox norms of gender relations and the structures of their families also had to look like those of the upper caste Hindus, who were their points of reference for such remodelling of cultural group behaviour. As a result, women lost their freedom and also perhaps their dignity, which the Matua sect had once promised them. This was indeed a general feature throughout Bengal where women were excluded from participation in such lower caste peasant movements.⁷

Apart from social practices, this process of assimilation was also quite evident in the realm of ideas. In the case of Matua philosophy this could be seen in the gradual incorporation of the theory of incarnation. Harichand in many of the latter-day devotional songs of the sect appears as the incarnation of Hari or Krishna.⁸ As legends would have it, he wished to entrust to Lord Siva his unfinished task of bringing salvation to the lower caste people. The latter listened to his prayer, and so Siva was born in his family as his son. Immediately after Harichand died, his soul entered the body of Guruchand, who thus became the dual incarnation,

combining in himself both the devotion and love of Hari or Krishna and the energy and prowess of Hara or Siva.⁹ The concept appears to have derived from the orthodox Vaishnava tradition, for Jiva Goswami's *Bhaktisandarva* makes it clear that only the *avatars* of Krishna could become the objects of the disciples' devotion and that Siva should be worshipped as well, since he was intrinsically a Vaishnava.¹⁰ Thus, paradoxically, the canonical formulations of the Goswamins of Vrindavana were setting the limits for their critics' imagination, even though the latter wanted to build up what were popularly conceived as 'deviant' orders. The adaptation, in this case, also took place because it was considered to be essential. The *gurus* believed that their followers, in order to assert themselves, needed both the gospels of *bhakti* (devotion) and *karma* (action). Moreover, the adoption of familiar cosmological concepts made the sect comprehensible and therefore acceptable to the common people; radically different or revolutionary concepts might not have been so popular, as the masses are not always readily attracted to innovations.

In a similar way, and perhaps for similar reasons, *gurubad*, i.e., the Brahmanical doctrine that inculcated total control of the spiritual life of the disciples by their preceptor, which both Harichand and Guruchand had once so zealously discarded, was also gradually incorporated into the belief system of the Matua sect. Not only were the first two *gurus* deified even in their life times, but their early disciples, who were instrumental in wider dissemination of their ideas, were also believed to have shared their supernatural powers. The Matua literature repeatedly emphasises that these early organisers of the sect, men like Gopal Sadhu, Nabagosain, Gosain Tarakchand, Hiranman Gosain, Lochan Gosain, etc., were not *gurus*, but devotees themselves.¹¹ But the way their glories have been sung in numerous devotional songs of the sect leaves little doubt that they too had assumed in the perceptions of their disciples the position of *Sravanaguru* or *Sikshaguru*, if not *Dikshaguru*.¹² Even the latter concept which was more Brahmanical, particularly the notion that the intermediacy of *guru* was essential for spiritual salvation of the disciple, appears to have gained greater acceptance, as some of the expressions in their devotional songs strongly suggest.¹³ These songs also indicate that the concepts of an illusory world and the primacy of the goal of salvation in the other world had also gained currency among the later disciples of Harichand and Guruchand, although both of them were so averse to these Brahmanical notions that sought to demotivate the lower classes and thus prevent them from achieving social mobility. In the collection of Matua songs there are numerous examples which imply

that the typically Vedantic theory of *Maya* and the desirability of renunciation of worldly pleasures or *Kamini-kanchan* (women and wealth), which the Matua belief system was once conceived in opposition to (see Chapter 2), had been absorbed and internalised by the followers of the sect during a later period.¹⁴ This absorption of philosophical notions from the established or orthodox religious order was symptomatic of the Matuas' inability to escape this dominant cultural influence. This was not unexpected either, as the Namasudra devotees of the sect were not living in social isolation. On the contrary, the major objective of the community was to seek integration into the constituted social structure and this necessitated absorption of the dominant cultural values of that society.

Indeed, never really in the Namasudra mental world were the dominant Hindu religio-cultural values completely rejected, nor in popular perceptions, despite the wishes of the *gurus*, did the Matua cult ever appear in an oppositional form. Adherence to it was therefore not considered to be an impediment to participation in a wider range of religious practices, either semi-tribal/animistic or orthodox Hindu. In the late nineteenth century, Herbert Risley had found them participating in Bastu (earth) *puja*, Bansura (river god) *puja*, Nauka (boat) *puja* and Manasa (snake goddess) *puja*.¹⁵ In the same period another report from Dacca shows that the Namasudras looked upon all the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon 'with veneration', though they were 'prohibited from worshipping the costly pujas themselves on account of the cost'. Their principal deities were Manasa (who had gained access to Hindu pantheon), Lakshmi and Kartik.¹⁶ As time passed, the Namasudras became zealous participants in all the Hindu festivals and on several occasions even got involved in violent conflicts with the upper caste Hindus, either in order to assert their right to participate in such public festivals as Bhawani *puja* (see Chapter 3) or gain access to the sanctum sanctorum of Kali temples (see Chapter 5). The conflicts, on the one hand, implied a growing protest on the part of the Namasudra peasants against the disabilities of caste. But they indicated also their eagerness to participate in the mainstream Hindu religious life, as both the deities, Bhawani and Kali, belonged to the *Sakta* tradition of Hinduism, which was quite opposed to the *Vaishnava* background of the Matua sect. This identification with the established Hindu religious life became more and more prominent or self-evident with the passage of time. Towards the middle of the twentieth century, worshipping Kali with animal sacrifices was found to be a common practice in the Namasudra villages of Tippera.¹⁷ In this respect what a Namasudra

commentator himself writes about their religious life around the same time is worth quoting:

In every Namasudra village in east Bengal, they remain busy with thirteen socio-religious festivals in twelve months [*baromase tero parban*]. At the time of Durga puja, in every Namasudra populated area, the puja is celebrated with great fanfare. Apart from this, the members of this community perform like orthodox Hindus all other festivals of Hindu society, such as Kalipuja, Lakshmipuja, Manasapuja, Bastupuja, etc.¹⁸

II

There are thus many indications of the Namasudras' integration into mainstream Hindu religious life. But the articulation of their Hindu identity, it needs to be emphasised, was also to a large extent the result of deliberate endeavours of the various Hindu religious organisations. For example, the Hindu Mission since the 1930s had been showing a clear awareness that in order to thwart what it conceived to be the Muslim threat it was essential to mobilise the Namasudras and other lower caste segments of the Bengali Hindu population.¹⁹ Around 1938, the Mission was actively working for the upliftment of the poor Namasudras in areas like Pirojpur in Bakarganj district or Nawabganj in Malda.²⁰ Again, it was from December–January 1934–35 that Swami Pranabananda of the Bharat Sebasram Sangha started to work among the Namasudras, Paundra-Kshatriyas and other Scheduled Caste villagers in the four districts of Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Barisal. From 1938 he intensified his efforts to organise the Hindu community of eastern Bengal in a more militant way – and the keynote of his message was to mobilise the untouchables and the lower castes so that instead of defecting from the Hindu camp they could increase its muscle power.²¹ The efforts continued into the 1940s with the active assistance of such prominent Scheduled Caste leaders as Patiram Roy of the Paundra-Kshatriyas, who addressed 'Backward Class Hindu Conferences' organised by the Sangha, where issues like conversion and *suddhi* were discussed along with the problems of spreading primary education.²²

However, most crucial in this respect were the endeavours of the All India Hindu Mahasabha which particularly devoted its energy towards the mobilisation of the Scheduled Caste peasantry since 1939–40. The holding of the twenty-first session of the organisation in Calcutta in

December 1939 had raised hopes among many articulate Hindus that the organisation would take the initiative to obliterate 'the queer and newly invented division between the caste Hindus and the depressed class' and would unite them for the 'salvation of "Hindusthan"'. The Mahasabha, it was expected, would start its branches in the 'remotest villages' to preach its message 'among the members of the so-called depressed classes that they belong[ed] to the great Hindu community with equal status with the caste Hindus'.²³ The conference at Calcutta, however, did not resolve to take any immediate action on this matter. Although Radha Kumud Mukherjee's speech indicated that there would be a resolution on the representation of the Scheduled Castes, nothing of that sort followed.²⁴

But this should not mean that there was no initiative at all. The formation of the Shyama-Huq ministry in December 1941 with the support of the majority of the Scheduled Caste legislators had already brought the two groups closer. Consequently, in the course of the next five years the Mahasabha built up an intricate network of rural branches in areas which had considerable concentration of Scheduled Caste population. By 1944 in eastern Bengal it had started 65 rural branches in the district of Bakarganj, 50 in Dacca, 43 in Faridpur, 29 in Jessore and 31 in Khulna – all the districts thickly populated by the Namasudras and other Scheduled Castes. Some of these branches were in areas which were already known for Namasudra activism in the past, such as Bhola, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, Rajapur, Goila, Chandshi, Batajore, Madaripur, Gopalganj, Amgram, Padmabila, Bhanga, Narail, Magura, Kalia, Bagerhat, etc.²⁵ Around this time Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a key figure in the Mahasabha organisation, was in close contact with the local level Scheduled Caste leaders like Krishnapada Samaddar, who was trying, under his advice, 'to remove the separationist [sic] mentality from the scheduled caste people'. They were being 'made to feel that they are an integral part of the Hindu society. Before all else they are Hindus'. In western Bengal the Paundra-Kshatriya MLA, Patiram Ray was acting as the liaison between Mukherjee and such local leaders as Samaddar.²⁶ In eastern Bengal, Upendranath Edbar, a Scheduled Caste MLA from Bakarganj, was receiving money from the Hindu Mahasabha 'to organise the scheduled caste people'.²⁷ In gatherings of such people he was explaining 'the present position of the Bengal ministry [led by Nazimuddin] and their misdeeds' and was preaching 'the dire necessity of the Hindu Sangathan [organisation] among the Hindus.' And the gatherings, as he reported back to the Mahasabha supremo, 'highly appreciated' his views.²⁸ At this stage, apart from such individuals, even

organisations like the Dacca Namasudra Samiti appear to have become eager to maintain a cordial relationship with Mukherjee and through him also perhaps with the Mahasabha.²⁹

The impact of such organised efforts to articulate the Hindu identity among the Namasudras could be seen very easily in the communal riots that subsequently broke out between them and the Muslims. There had been a series of riots between the two communities in the past; but these were, as already mentioned in earlier chapters, of a more secular character. There had been communal frenzy centering around land disputes, protection of women or for the honour of the community. Hardly ever there was any overt use of religious idioms. Simultaneously with confrontation there was co-operation; but the situation definitely began to change from the 1940s, as arguably due to the Hindu Mahasabha influence the Namasudras now began to confront the Muslims not simply as Namasudras, as they did previously, but as Hindus as well.

After the election of 1937 when the leaders of the Namasudra and Muslim communities were arriving in a political adjustment and the first coalition ministry under Fazlul Huq had started functioning smoothly, their followers in the east Bengal countryside got involved in a series of violent riots. The first took place in February 1938 in the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district, where the two communities fought over disputed cattle.³⁰ This incident was followed by another fracas in March in the Tangail subdivision of the district of Mymensingh, where the two groups fought for a piece of land, resulting in the death of one Namasudra and injury to five others.³¹ A more serious riot broke out in April–May 1938 in the district of Jessore. The immediate cause of the riot, as far as it could be ascertained, was a quarrel over an *ail* (landmark between two plots of land) and an assault on a Namasudra woman by some Muslims, who were later convicted in a court case. Both the parties prepared for a revenge. The Muslims took the first initiative on 28 April by attacking the Namasudras of Kullia in the Magura Police Station and causing injuries to some of them. The Namasudras retaliated on the same day and as the Muslims retreated, they celebrated their victory with beats of drums or *jaydhak*.³² The tension mounted again on 30 April and spread over to the neighbouring areas under Narail, Salikha and Lohagara Police Stations. Seven to eight hundred Muslims were mobilised to attack the Namasudra villages, while the latter, assisted by their fellow compatriots from the neighbouring districts, also prepared to defend themselves. Spilling of blood was only averted by the timely intervention of the police.³³

Until now the rioting in Jessore, as elsewhere, had been entirely due to local initiative of the peasants of the two communities. But soon their elite leaders seized the opportunity to politicise the event, as for the Namasudra leaders it offered an excellent entry point to reach once again their estranged peasant brothers. The Namasudra Association sent an urgent telegram to their minister Mukunda Behari Mullick, then in Darjeeling, soliciting his urgent intervention in the matter.³⁴ The President of the Faridpur Namasudra Association and the Faridpur Depressed Classes Association also sent a frantic appeal to the Governor 'to stop the rioting without delay' for the good and well-being of both the communities.³⁵ Now, unlike on other similar occasions in the past, the Hindu Sabha decided to take up the issue and make it an item for a propaganda campaign. In an organised way rumours were spread that temples had been desecrated and images broken and an Assistant Secretary of the association was sent to the troubled area to conduct an enquiry on the spot.³⁶ Religious colours were thus lent to a fracas which initially had nothing to do with religion. From 1 May the tensions started subsiding; but the feelings between the two communities remained strained.³⁷ And an actual breach of peace on 3 and 6 May in Narail and Lohagara Police Station areas could only be prevented by a route march by the police and by the threat of posting a punitive police.³⁸ There was no further trouble, although both the communities remained somewhat panicky, anticipating any time an attack from the other, as it usually happened on earlier occasions.³⁹

We can read many things into this first set of riots following the election of 1937. First of all, the political settlements at the top, as we have already noted in Chapter 5, hardly influenced the affairs at the grassroots level, where the Namasudra and the Muslim masses remained intensely conscious of their community identity and palpably sensitive about their collective honour, which they were prepared to vindicate with spears and guns if necessary. And in this they were not even reliant on their community leaders from outside, who intervened only at a later stage to gain political mileage out of the situation. Finally, particularly as the Jessore riot showed, there was now the beginning of a conscious initiative by the Hindu religious organisations to infuse religious emotions into the structure of community relations in the Bengal countryside.

During the subsequent years the relationship between the two communities continued to be tense particularly in Faridpur and Jessore-Khulna regions. In January 1940 trouble broke out again in Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur, where the two communities fought over a cause

which was not even 'clearly reported', resulting in the death of one Muslim.⁴⁰ In March another riot was reported from Narail subdivision of Jessore where damage to crops by cattle resulted in the killing of a Muslim by a Namasudra.⁴¹ Then in April, a land dispute between the Namasudras of Ghanashyampur in the Kalia Police Station of Jessore and the Muslims of Atlia in the Terakhada Police Station of Khulna sparked off a protracted battle between the two communities in the border regions between the two districts.⁴² The tension persisted until the end of August. In the meantime it had spread to other areas of Jessore as well.⁴³

These were the regions traditionally notorious for violent frictions between the two communities and the causes of friction so far also remained the same. But some changes in their community organisation and collective mentalities were visible at the same time. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee during this period was addressing meetings in the east Bengal countryside and was pleading for 'Hindu unity and political resistance to communal demands of the Muslims'.⁴⁴ In Namasudra populated areas like Jessore and Narail, events such as 'All Bengal Hindu Day' on 4 August 1940 was being observed with success.⁴⁵ While Mukherjee's speeches during this period increased Hindu militancy around the demand for *Akhand Hindustan*, the Muslim League propaganda 'more forcibly impressed on the minds of the Muslims' the demand for Pakistan.⁴⁶ This was the period that witnessed what a recent historian of communal riots in Bengal has called 'the transition to a new phase', marked by 'the convergence of elite and popular communalism'.⁴⁷ The most authentic representation of the new mood was perhaps the Dacca riot of 18–21 March 1941. The Namasudras and the Muslims of other regions could hardly remain unaffected by this new high pitched temper of politicised communalism. Simultaneously with the Dacca riot, another riot broke out in Khulna on 20 March 1941 in which 'one Namasudra Hindu village and one Moslem village [were] burnt to the ground'.⁴⁸ We do not know anything more about this riot; but its timing perhaps suggests that it was not caused by any land dispute or quarrel over cattle. Some later developments in this area would substantiate our hypothesis.

The year of 1942 passed rather peacefully, so far as communal violence was concerned, as the attention of the entire nation was focused on the Quit India movement. But the Mahasabha attempts to Hinduise the social identity of the Scheduled Castes did not cease. How such attempts were being made would be clear if we look at the events at the village of Tularampur in Narail police station of Jessore in February—

March 1943. Here on 27 February a Namasudra girl while passing through a field was caught hold of by a Muslim young man who allegedly 'made every attempt to outrage her modesty'. A small boy accompanying the girl raised an alarm and the man fled before doing any harm. But this incident sparked off considerable tension between the two communities, though an actual conflict was avoided because of the intervention of the police. A peace meeting was organised in which the leaders of both the communities were involved. The tension, however, did not subside, because of the local *zamindar* Prodyut Kumar Roy and a teacher at Narail College, Ramesh Chandra Banerji, who were the President and the Secretary respectively of the Narail Hindu Mahasabha organisation. They made arrangements to bring Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to their locality, 'just to lend encouragements', as the Jessore Superintendent of Police suspected, 'to the local Hindu Mahasabha workers and also to give a strong footing to the Hindu organisation at Narail'. As the subdivision was already tense, the SP appealed frantically to the higher authorities to stop the proposed visit of the Hindu Mahasabha President, since such a visit, he perceived, would cause further embitterment.⁴⁹

It was on 17 April that Mukherjee visited Jessore and addressed three meetings in the district.⁵⁰ Though apparently unconnected with this visit, four days later, on 21 April 1943 another incident took place in neighbouring Faridpur. In the Dumuria Union of Kotwalipara Police Station of Gopalganj subdivision, about sixty Muslims attacked a group of Namasudras while they were harvesting paddy. One of the Namasudras died immediately and two others received gunshot. Soon after, a strong party of Namasudras marched towards the Muslim villages where they burnt and looted several houses. The news of both these incidents spread rapidly, and the people of both communities prepared for a serious riot, which was averted by the timely intervention of the Subdivisional Officer.⁵¹ This incident was not uncommon and was analogous of the past; but the role played by the recent militant mood of the Hindus cannot be discounted either. What happened one year later in Khulna further shows how this mood had affected the Namasudras as well.

On 25 May 1944, at the village of Basuniarchar in Mollahat Police Station of Bagerhat subdivision in Khulna, an old dispute over the possession of a plot of land, as the local police officer reported, 'suddenly . . . took a communal turn'. Wild rumours rapidly led to the mobilisation of the Namasudras and Muslims, 'numbering about a thousand on each side'. In the event, the police had to fire four rounds to disperse the crowd, whereupon the Namasudras formed themselves into

small bands and began to loot Muslim houses over a four square-mile area.⁵² At this juncture the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police arrived with reinforcements and prevented large numbers of people belonging to both the communities from coming to the troubled area from Faridpur across the river Madhumati. On 27 May trouble broke out again at mid-day at a distance of six miles where houses belonging to both the communities were set on fire and looted. At the junction of four districts of Khulna, Jessore, Faridpur and Bakarganj, in a 'vast area' of four to six square kilometres, the situation remained tense 'as feelings . . . [were] running high'.⁵³ It was only after the arrival of reinforcements of armed police on 31 May that the situation could be brought under control.⁵⁴ By then, in all two hundred thatched houses were affected by incendiaryism; four Muslims and one Namasudra were killed and a few were injured; the value of properties lost or damaged exceeded one and a half lakh rupees,⁵⁵ 80 per cent of which belonged to the Muslims and the rest to the Namasudras.⁵⁶ It transpired that the Namasudras, who had the better of the situation, had used guns, as on other occasions, and this indicated the involvement of some of the well-to-do and leading members of this community. Later enquiries revealed that Bhawani Sankar Gayen of Dattadanga, a Member of the Khulna District Board and the Kodalia Union Board, a *zamindar* and a relative of Mukunda Behari Mullick, and more significantly, a grand-son-in-law of Guruchand Thakur and a brother-in-law of P. R. Thakur, was the actual 'ring leader' and his two brothers were accused of 'murder by using a gun'.⁵⁷

What happened after the riot stopped is, however, of greater importance. The local Muslim leaders alleged that the ill-feeling had been instigated by the Hindu Mahasabha organisers working in the area since the last Khulna riot of 1941 (referred to above). The Mahasabha had started a unit at Matibhanga in the Bakarganj district on the other side of the river,⁵⁸ where immediately after the present riot a public meeting was organised, as Ashutosh Lahiri, the Mahasabha MLA claimed, 'for the social uplift of the Scheduled Castes'. The venue of the meeting was at a distance of only eight miles from the riot affected areas⁵⁹ and it was to be addressed by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee himself. What was more important, on his way to Matibhanga, Mukherjee was scheduled to address another meeting on 2 June at Bagerhat, the headquarter of the subdivision where the riot had actually taken place. The Muslims prepared to protest against it and the atmosphere was surcharged with all sorts of rumour. Under the circumstances, the district authorities a day before the conference banned all meetings and

processions. Mukherjee arrived at Bagerhat in the morning of 2 June and on being told that the meeting had been banned, proceeded on a launch towards Mollahat where the riot had just stopped two days ago. At Mollahat steamer station a large crowd greeted him with such overtly communal slogans as '*Hindu sakti ki joy*' [Victory to Hindu power]. The Muslims gathered too and shouted counter slogans like '*Muslim sakti ki joy*' [Victory to Muslim power] and '*Shyama Prosad dhansa houk*' [Destruction to Shyama Prosad]. Seeing the condition, Mukherjee did not get down there and went away.⁶⁰

This incident is certainly indicative of a new feature of Namasudra-Muslim relationship in this area, where local frictions over agrarian disputes were being fast tagged on to the wider political conflict between the two religious communities. As it was evident from their vindication of the Hindu power, the identification of the common Namasudra villagers with the Hindu community in this region was perhaps no longer a distant goal for the Hindu Mahasabha. The local officers at Khulna strongly felt that the present ill feeling in the area had been 'instigated by the organisers of the Hindu Mahasabha'. When after the riot the Mahasabha proposed to launch a relief operation, the local Muslims thought that this was only a ploy to get its 'representatives into the locality and stir up more trouble'. The District Magistrate therefore offered to accept food and clothing from them to be distributed by local officers. The Mahasabha did not agree to this proposal, whereupon its members were allowed to go to the affected areas with local officers accompanying them. But even this was unacceptable to the Mahasabha,⁶¹ which was at last permitted to move into the area, when Ashutosh Lahiri promised not to 'introduce politics into relief work'.⁶² But, as the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Presidency Range, complained about three weeks later, the representatives of the Mahasabha made 'anti-Moslem and anti-Government propaganda in the locality under the cloak of the distribution of relief and there . . . [were] rumours that the Namasudras intend[ed] to start trouble again as soon as the police camp . . . [was] abolished'.⁶³

The extent to which social environment in the Khulna countryside had been vitiated by mutual distrust and suspicion between the two communities can also be gauged from the allegations made by the two rival deputations that met the Presidency Commissioner visiting the affected area shortly after the riot. The deputation of the Khulna District Scheduled Caste Association, led by the two Namasudra leaders, Rasiklal Biswas and Bhawani Sankar Gayen, complained of police excesses perpetrated on the Namasudras. This was done, they alleged, with the

active connivance of the communally motivated Muslim officials who manned the district administration at that time. The local Muslim League deputation, on the other hand, while referring to the recent riot-related cases, expressed a complete lack of faith in a trial by jury at the Khulna district court. They did not have any confidence in the Hindu judge and in a jury which would inevitably consist of a larger number of Hindus.⁶⁴ The attitudes of both the groups clearly indicated the existence of an environment of mutual distrust and nearly complete communalisation of collective mentalities.

Outside intervention and politicisation of community relations were being attempted by many other groups as well. At this time, the Nazimudin ministry was in power, with Jogendranath Mandal as a minister, and Mukunda Behari Mullick as the Deputy Leader of the coalition party. Both were preaching a separate identity for the Scheduled Castes. So when the Hindu Mahasabha proposed to organise the Matibhanga Hindu conference, both Namasudra leaders, as Ashutosh Lahiri alleged in the Legislative Assembly, 'began to strain their every nerve' to make the conference a failure. They implored the local Namasudra population not to join the conference and when this endeavour failed, Jogendranath himself visited the area and addressed three public meetings 'within two miles of the venue of the conference'. In all these meetings he was allegedly offering scholarships and jobs to Namasudra students if they refrained from joining the anti-ministerial conference. To lend credibility to his offers, he took with him the Special Officer for Scheduled Caste Education, who was thus 'utilised by the Hon'ble Minister for serving a purely political purpose'.⁶⁵ After the riot, accompanied by the local SDO, Mandal also visited the affected areas in Mollahat and requested the local officials to withdraw the cases against the offenders.⁶⁶ A possible reason for this request, which the local officers were all opposed to, could have been the involvement of the Gayen family, related to Mukunda Behari Mullick. The latter also intervened to save his relatives and sent two memoranda to the Chief Minister alleging police excesses against the Namasudras. Subsequent official enquiries found all these allegations to be baseless;⁶⁷ but in the process a riot in the villages of Khulna was deliberately made into an issue of provincial politics. While the local 'ring leaders', who were allegedly 'inciting the illiterate and exciting people',⁶⁸ used to their advantage their connections with the leaders at the provincial level, the latter did the same to maintain and consolidate their constituencies. The Mollahat-Calcutta link was clearly visible when Bhawani Sankar Gayen presided over a meeting on 2 July at the University Institute Hall in Calcutta and repeated the same

allegations which Mullick had communicated to the Chief Minister and were later found to be baseless.⁶⁹

The Mollahat riot was used by the opponents of the ministry as well. In fact, the 2 July meeting was in response to two other meetings organised by such groups. On 25 June the first of these meetings was held at Bouddha Bihar Hall at College Square, with Birat Chandra Mandal on the chair. The meeting expressed sympathies for the suffering Namasudras, demanded immediate permission for the Hindu Mahasabha to distribute relief in the riot-torn areas and expressed displeasure at the actions of the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police in Khulna, both of whom incidentally were Muslims. This was followed by another meeting on 27 June, held at the University Institute Hall under the auspices of the Bengal Scheduled Caste Association, with Rai Charan Ray in the chair. This meeting was more political in nature, as it resolved unanimously that for the peace and well-being of the province the present ministry should resign and a national government with representatives of all parties be established. When Kshetranath Singha, a supporter of the government, tried to say that the Scheduled Castes could not trust the caste Hindus, he was shouted down. Upendranath Edbar and Pushpajit Barman, on the other hand, argued that since the present government had failed to establish peace in the country, the sooner it was removed the better it would be for the province. The meeting demanded the suspension of the erring District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police of Khulna and resolved that since Mukunda Behari Mullick, being a man of Khulna, had failed to do his duties in the disturbed areas, he should resign from his seat in the legislature.⁷⁰

The two Muslim officers, who were now being made the political scapegoats for a self-perpetuating environment of violence, saw in these meetings, perhaps not without justification, 'an attempt to make political capital out of the Mollahat affair and thereby alienate the sympathies of those Namasudra members who . . . [were] still with the present Ministry'.⁷¹ The Commissioner of the Presidency Division also thought that 'the whole agitation was a political ramp by the opponents of the present ministry to discredit the present Government'.⁷² After a visit to the troubled area, the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Presidency Range, also came to the same conclusion that 'the local Namasudras . . . [were] being used by the leaders of the community in Calcutta in conjunction with the Hindu Mahasabha for political ends'.⁷³ There is reason to believe that there was truth in this official version of the situation.

To put it in proper perspective, we may only suggest that the Namasudra community identity by now clearly appeared to have merged

into the greater Hindu consciousness. This was loudly proclaimed in April 1945 when a Kali puja procession of the Namasudras in the Mithapur market area of Lohagara Police Station in Jessore sang and danced wildly in front of a mosque during the usual prayer hours. A similar incidence took place a few days later in the Narail subdivision as well.⁷⁴ Any such articulation of Hindu identity by the lower castes at the local level, in the context of the existing political equations, was also likely to be linked up quickly to the cross-currents of institutional politics at the top. This tendency towards politicisation of Hindu-Muslim relationship became more apparent during the Calcutta riot of August 1946, which rapidly sent its ripples to such distant areas as Kushtia, Chandpur, Kishorganj, Dacca, Faridpur and finally Tippera and Noakhali in October.⁷⁵ The Noakhali disturbances, in which the Namasudras were some of the main victims,⁷⁶ 'further emphasised the fact', as a secret Government memo concluded, 'that, at the present time, any communal disturbances may react directly on the main political parties and that political and communal matters are virtually indistinguishable.'⁷⁷ The Namasudras, and for that matter the entire Scheduled Caste population of Bengal, could hardly remain insulated from this general political atmosphere.

The main issue around which this communal-political polarisation had taken place was the Pakistan demand of the Muslim League. In March 1946 at a meeting at Agra, Ambedkar had announced his support for the League demand: 'Muslims are fighting for their legitimate rights and they are bound to achieve Pakistan'.⁷⁸ About a month later, in a press interview he justified his own demand for separate villages for the Scheduled Castes. This would not amount, he thought, to an encroachment on the rights of any other party. There were large areas of cultivable waste land lying untenanted in the country which could be set aside for the settlement of the Scheduled Castes.⁷⁹ The distant echoes of this demand could be heard from areas like the Central Provinces where the Scheduled Castes started talking vaguely about a 'Dalistan';⁸⁰ and north Bengal, where a few Rajbansis, supported by the Scheduled Caste Federation leader Jogendranath Mandal, clamoured for a 'Rajasthan' or a separate Rajbansi Kshatriya homeland.⁸¹ But the majority of Scheduled Castes in Bengal, the Rajbansis included, and the Namasudras most evidently, seemed to be exactly on the opposite side of the pole, as their responses to the partition issue clearly shows that they had completely identified themselves with the Hindu sentiments and apprehensions on this matter.

In February 1947 the Hindu Mahasabha appointed a Working

Committee to report on 'the feasibility and desirability of having a separate province for securing a homeland for Bengal Hindus'.⁸² Following this, on 6 April, the Mahasabha workers at a conference at Tarakeswar resolved to start a movement in east Bengal for 'retaining East Bengal province . . . within the Indian union'.⁸³ But as it appears, a movement had already been launched in the east Bengal countryside for building up public opinion in support of the proposed Bengali Hindu homeland. A survey of public opinion by *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in early May showed that an overwhelming proportion of 98 per cent of the Bengali Hindus supported partition.⁸⁴ The Scheduled Caste population of the province could hardly isolate themselves from this popular euphoria that Hindu Mahasabha had created. The Namasudras of eastern Bengal in particular could not afford to remain aloof, as the proposed partition plan concerned them in a very direct way.

In Bakarganj district on 3 April 1947 a joint meeting of the Jhalakati Subdivisional Congress Committee and the Subdivisional Hindu Mahasabha resolved to demand the creation of 'a separate Province . . . comprising the Hindu majority areas of Bengal' which would remain 'an integral part of the Indian Union'. The new province, it was demanded, should 'include the Barisal Sadar Subdivisions (North & South) and the Pirojpur Subdivisions of the District of Bakarganj'⁸⁵ – in both the areas, one should remember, the Namasudras constituted the largest Hindu caste group. A month later, on 4 May, the Goila Union Hindu Mahasabha held another meeting where identical resolutions were passed unanimously.⁸⁶ On the same day in the Gaurnadi Police Station area of Bakarganj district, there were two other meetings at Tarkibandar and Ramshidhi Bazar and at both the places resolutions were passed in favour of partition and inclusion of the Hindu majority areas of Bakarganj and Faridpur into the new province for the Bengali Hindus. The meetings were attended by people from Barthi, Khanjapur, Medakul, Chandshi, Goila, Bakal, Bagdha, Gaurnadi, Mahilara, Batajore, Nalchira, Chandrahar, Pinglakathi, Sharikal and other villages of Gaurnadi Police Station⁸⁷ – a large segment of the population of these villages, as we know, were Namasudras.

In neighbouring Faridpur the Scheduled Caste population was more directly involved in this propaganda campaign. On 6 May, a 'meeting of the scheduled caste inhabitants of the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur District' was held at village Tuthamandra. The meeting was attended by 'several thousand villagers' and was addressed by fifteen speakers, all of whom except one belonged to the Scheduled Castes. It resolved to support partition, since there was 'no other remedy' for the threats to the

'life, property, honour and culture of the non-Moslems of this province' and demanded that the Gopalganj subdivision should be united with Khulna, and attached to the new province of West Bengal.⁸⁸ In the same Gopalganj subdivision, another 'very largely attended meeting of the Scheduled Castes' was held at Boulali on 12 May and it again adopted identical resolutions.⁸⁹ In Khulna the extent of Scheduled Caste mass participation in the partition campaign is unknown to us. But in this district a 'conference of the leading members of the Scheduled Caste community' has been reported to have been held at Khulna town on 3 May. It demanded 'the creation of a separate province called West Bengal Province under the Central Indian Union.' It should include the city of Calcutta, the Presidency Division, Burdwan Division, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts and the western parts of Rajshahi division.⁹⁰ Incidentally, the Khulna district town had an important Namasudra centre, the Matuakhali Ashram, built on a plot of hundred *bigha* of land, where the Namasudra students from all parts of the province assembled, stayed and continued their studies.⁹¹ It will not, therefore, be a wild conjecture to suppose that some of them at least participated in this meeting. On the following day, the same resolution was adopted again at Bagerhat town at another meeting of the Scheduled Castes of the Bagerhat subdivision.⁹² The Hindu militancy among the Namasudras of this region we have already noted.

To some politicians in Bengal, however, partition of the province was still unthinkable. It was at this juncture on 22 May that Sarat Bose, now a rather lonely figure in the Bengal Congress, and Abul Hashim of the Bengal Muslim League released to the press their proposal for the formation of a free united Bengal. The campaign was then taken up by Suhrawardy and his followers in the Bengal Muslim League and among their other supporters was Jogendranath Mandal, the President of the Bengal Provincial Scheduled Caste Federation.⁹³ The Working Committee of the Federation on 14 May resolved that

the division of the province into Hindu and Muslim Bengal . . . [was] no solution of the communal problems . . . [It would] check the growing political consciousness and ruthlessly crush the solidarity of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal . . . While the Scheduled Castes of Eastern Bengal . . . [would] be at the mercy of the majority community [i.e., the Muslims], the Scheduled Castes of Western Bengal . . . [would] be subject to perpetual slavery of the caste Hindus. Hence the Scheduled Castes of this province . . . [could] not be a party to such a mischievous and dangerous move.⁹⁴

Both Suhrawardy and Mandal at this stage were claiming that the Scheduled Caste Hindus were not in favour of the partition of Bengal, as demanded by the Hindu Mahasabha,⁹⁵ and Jinnah on this very ground sought to defend the united Bengal proposal. But a memorandum submitted by the Bengal Scheduled Castes to the Viceroy supporting partition indicated an altogether different attitude. Most of the Bengali Hindus believed at this juncture that the united Bengal move was nothing but a ploy to have a greater Pakistan that would incorporate the economically rich western Bengal, particularly the city of Calcutta.⁹⁶ The majority of the Scheduled Caste population, particularly the Namasudras in eastern Bengal, also shared these misgivings. They seem to have by now completely identified themselves with the sentiments whipped up by the Mahasabha and rejected the leadership of Jogendranath Mandal.

On 21 June 1947 a meeting at Sreeramkathi High School compound in Nazirpur Police Station of Bakarganj district was 'attended by thousands of people specially of Scheduled Caste communities'. The meeting resolved that the north western portions of Bakarganj district, along with the contiguous areas of Gopalganj subdivision, Rajair and Kalkini Police Stations of Faridpur, 'being predominantly Hindu areas wherein the Scheduled castes are majority, . . . should be included in the West Bengal Province for the cultural, religious and economic advancement of the Scheduled Castes who in no case would submit to the rule of the Muslims'. The meeting further resolved that 'the Scheduled Caste Hindus of the area have no confidence in the leadership of Mr Jogendranath Mandal . . . because of his surrender to the Muslim League'.⁹⁷ Another meeting on 22 June at Jalabari School compound in Swarupkati Police Station of Bakarganj resolved that along with the above mentioned regions, 'the Northern portions of Pirojpur subdivision . . . being predominantly Hindu Majority areas' should also be included in the province of West Bengal. The other resolution passed in the meeting registered the lack of confidence of the Scheduled Castes of the area in the leadership of Jogendranath Mandal.⁹⁸ On the same day another 'Public Meeting of the People of Pirojpur P. S. North', held at Rayerkathi School compound, adopted unanimously the same resolutions.⁹⁹ All these three meetings, like the other pro-partition meetings mentioned earlier, were presided over by local Scheduled Caste leaders, who were never prominent in institutional politics. This certainly suggests some amount of initiative at the grassroots level. But on the other hand, the exactly identical wordings of the resolutions adopted in three different meetings held simultaneously at different places also

indicate some amount of organisation and planning to mobilise public opinion among the local Scheduled Caste population, most of whom were Namasudras.

Their counterparts in north Bengal, the Rajbansis, also identified themselves with the same sentiments and apprehensions. A 'meeting of the Scheduled Caste Rajbansis of Dinajpur', held at Thakurgaon on 22 June, demanded that 'the Districts of Dinajpur, Malda and such portions of Rangpur which are predominantly inhabited by the Rajbansis . . . be included in the new Province of West Bengal.' This meeting was also presided over by a not so well-known Rajbansi leader, indicating local initiative to remain in the Hindu province to preserve 'the linguistic, social and cultural unity of the Rajbansi community as a whole.'¹⁰⁰

All these meetings in the villages of eastern and northern Bengal revealed a new mentality which recognised caste only as a microcosm within the greater Hindu identity. At the institutional level also, most of the Scheduled Caste MLAs had already accepted this integrationist position (see Chapter 6). It became clear when the partition issue was put to vote in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 20 June 1947. Rup Narayan Roy, the Communist Scheduled Caste MLA from Dinajpur did not vote, like Jyoti Basu of his party. Four Scheduled Caste members from east Bengal, evidently Jogendranath Mandal and his associates, voted with the Muslims. The rest of the Scheduled Caste MLAs, including most of the Namasudras, voted for the Congress-Mahasabha scheme to keep West Bengal as a Hindu majority province within the larger political entity of India.¹⁰¹

The partition, however, did not ultimately help the Scheduled Caste masses, as the Namasudras, like the Rajbansis, lost their territorial anchorage. Contrary to their hopes and in spite of their pleas, most of the Namasudra inhabited areas in Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, like the Rajbansi areas of Dinajpur and Rangpur, went to East Pakistan, instead of West Bengal. The post-partition violence, as F. C. Bourne, the last British Governor of East Bengal observed in 1950, left many of them with 'nothing beyond their lives and the clothes they stand up in.'¹⁰² This compelled many of them to migrate as refugees to India, where being uprooted from their traditional homeland they had to begin afresh their struggle for life. In the early 1950s, in the border districts of West Bengal we find the Namasudra refugees involved in violent strifes with the locally entrenched groups like the Goalas and Muslims, desperately trying to acquire a foothold in the area.¹⁰³ Thus social mobility, which they had achieved in course of the last seventy-five years, was undone and the strength of their social movement was sapped as the community

remained separated on the two sides of the new international borders. But what the partition movement undoubtedly indicated and the post-partition behaviour of the Namasudras confirmed was their integration into the mainstream of the Bengali Hindu society, of which they have remained part and parcel ever since.

III

There was, however, yet another level of integration for the Namasudra and other Scheduled Caste masses in Bengal, reflected in their shift from caste and religious to class affiliation. The same people who responded positively to Hinduisation, also participated in the more class-orientated movements and collaborated with the other peasants from across the religious boundary. The mobilisation of the Namasudra peasantry by the Krishak Praja Party in the mid-1930s has already been mentioned (see Chapter 5). But they were denied this platform when at the time of the election of 1937 the party abandoned its Scheduled Caste base in order to compete with the Muslim League for Muslim votes. At that juncture the Namasudra and other Scheduled Caste masses had very little option other than following the leadership of their caste leaders. The Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) could have provided for them another alternative political platform. But the organisation had come into existence in March 1937 and at that time it was only at its infancy having just over eleven thousand members.¹⁰⁴ 'The Communists' in Bengal in 1936-37, as a CPGB observer remarked, 'had been isolated from the masses.' The 'opportunities for mass work . . . [were] there' and these now had to be taken advantage of in order to break this isolation.¹⁰⁵ It was from 1937-38 that this effort at mass organisation by the Communists began and soon it started to bear fruit.

Since the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1935 the Indian Communists had been following the strategy of working from within the Congress. Their goal was to form a revolutionary wing within the broad anti-imperialist front and organise a mass movement for national liberation. Around 1937 a number of prominent Communists, as a government report suspected, were operating from within the left wing of the Congress and were 'working towards an independent peasant movement with organisational and political independence, under cover of political affiliation with Congress.'¹⁰⁶ It was particularly in Chittagong division, as another government report noted with alarm, that there was 'a tendency among

ex-detenus and members of the former terrorist organisations to form Communist groups within their local Congress camps'. In other areas the Congressmen supported the no-rent cry and encouraged forcible cultivation of *zamindari* areas. In districts like Khulna and Tippera, an 'All India Krishak Day' was celebrated in September. Some of the existing Krishak Samitis, for example those in Tippera, merged into the Congress, while attempts were also made to establish new samitis in 'areas where they were hitherto unknown'. Such organisations were started 'under the aegis of Congress', and were suspected to have been 'infected *ab initio* with communist ideas'.¹⁰⁷ In many of these areas, we may note here, a sizeable proportion of the peasantry belonged to the Namasudra or other lower Hindu peasant castes.

What happened subsequently in some districts confirmed the official suspicion. In the district of Khulna, for example, Krishak meetings in May 1937 attracted 'large audiences' and were addressed by prominent Communist leaders like Niharendu Datta Mazumdar.¹⁰⁸ In June the District Magistrate reported that efforts were being made all over his district 'to form Krishak Samitis on communistic lines'.¹⁰⁹ In April 1938 the BPKS held a meeting at Satkhira Sabjibagan, where the leaders attacked the *zamindari* system. In the surrounding areas 'the local officers report[ed] a tendency on the part of the tenants to withhold payment of rent'.¹¹⁰ By August agrarian troubles developed in the Satkhira subdivision as a whole over the old question of converting holdings into *khas* for non-payment of rent and reducing the tenant to the position of a *bargadar* or tenant at will on his own holding.¹¹¹ In the neighbouring district of Jessore also 'several meetings in furtherance of the Krishak movement' had taken place in the Narail and Sadar subdivisions in March 1938. But these were not reported to be very largely attended.¹¹² Then on 28 and 29 April the Jessore Krishak Samiti held a meeting at Keshabpur, where 'about 2,000 people, mostly Hindus attended'. The proceedings of the meeting were, however, marred by a friction between the Krishak volunteers and the Muslim League supporters.¹¹³

The other Namasudra inhabited districts of Faridpur and Bakarganj also witnessed 'considerable Communist activity' around the same time and it was spearheaded by the so-called 'terrorist groups'.¹¹⁴ In early 1938 in the Madaripur subdivision of Faridpur the Congress socialists were reported to be active 'in working up economic agitation on socialist lines', while in Bakarganj district they were found to be busy 'economically uplifting' the tenantry.¹¹⁵ In Bakarganj a peasant conference was organised by the 'ex-detenus' on 4 May at Chandshi,

which was already known for Namasudra activism; it did not, however, succeed in pulling a very large crowd. In the neighbouring district of Mymensingh the same political groups were reported to be engaged 'in stirring up agrarian unrest and setting tenants against landlords'.¹¹⁶ In Munshiganj subdivision of Dacca around the same time tenants 'formed combines to take forcible possession of lands from the *khas* possession of landlords and from mortgagees'.¹¹⁷ Indeed, in the entire Dacca Division, as one government report indicated, 'ex-detenus and ex-political convicts' were active in forming Krishak Samitis in furtherance of the mass contact policy of the Congress. Resolutions were passed at meetings demanding exemption from payment of rent, taxes, cess and interest due to moneylenders.¹¹⁸ Such endeavours by the 'Congress and other subversive elements' gradually resulted in what another government report described as 'the growth of a "no rent mentality"' in the Bengal countryside during the year 1938.¹¹⁹ How far exactly this mentality was shared by the Namasudra peasantry we do not know. But there is no reason to believe that they remained unaffected, as cases of tenants' movements participated in exclusively by them and supported by the local Congress leaders were reported during the period immediately subsequent to this.¹²⁰

By 1940, as an intelligence report indicated, the Kisan movement in Bengal had come almost totally under the control of the Communists, 'with fairly wide "contacts" with the peasantry'. During this year the Bengal Committee of the CPI is reported to have issued further instructions to district and local committees to intensify such mobilising efforts and to shift their offices from towns to villages and industrial centres.¹²¹ Around this time regular 'district organisations' of the CPI were operating in Calcutta, Hooghly, Dacca, Barisal, Rangpur and Dinajpur – the last four having major concentrations of lower caste peasants, i.e., the Namasudras and the Rajbansis. In addition to these, the Bengal Committee was sending instructions to a number of other districts.¹²² Such organisational efforts also evoked immense popular response: in June 1940 when the BPKS had its annual conference at Panjia in Jessore, its membership had shot up to 34,000 from a mere 11,000 three years ago.¹²³ One year later, in June 1941, another intelligence report noted with alarm that: 'in Bengal . . . the Kisans are largely under C.P.I. influence'.¹²⁴

This influence of the CPI was located in areas which we identified earlier as the Namasudra inhabitation zone (see Chapter 1) and these areas increasingly witnessed a growing peasant militancy. From March 1940, there were meetings in Khulna district to build up a peasant

movement against the payment of market tolls, an illegal cess traditionally collected by the *zamindars* in an unhindered way.¹²⁵ The efforts were concentrated in the Dumuria police station and were being organised by the 'ex-detenus', who were also collecting subscriptions to organise a district Krishak conference under the presidency of the ex-Minister Syed Nausher Ali, who had of late, as an official report indicated, 'taken openly to the advocacy of Communism.'¹²⁶ The meeting was held on 20–21 April at Sovna in Dumuria PS and 'resulted in some no-rent propaganda', though without much success.¹²⁷

In neighbouring Jessore, tensions had been mounting since January 1940 between the *jotedars* and the *bargadars* of Kalia Police Station, as the latter were no longer satisfied with half the crop as their share.¹²⁸ The Namasudra and Muslim sharecroppers of this area had fought over this issue in 1928¹²⁹ and were destined to fight again six years later during the Tebhaga movement. Their present struggle for two-thirds share of the produce continued until the harvesting season of 1941 and affected at least two unions, i.e., Moubhog and Ghatbhog.¹³⁰ Meanwhile, in March 1940 Nausher Ali had begun his tour in the Narail subdivision and had persuaded the peasants not to repay their agricultural loans. The movement does not appear to have been very successful as the collections were not greatly affected. Also failure was the no-rent campaign in Narail, which he conducted along with the 'Samar Parishad', an organisation 'consisting of Congress people'.¹³¹ But the other movement against the payment of market tolls, the propaganda activities for which had also begun in March 1940,¹³² created a commotion in the district. In June the Bengal Provincial Krishak Conference was held at Panjia in Jessore, followed by a subdivisional Krishak conference in Narail. Subsequent to this, agitations were organised, particularly in Narail subdivision against the payment of *tola* (toll) taxes to the Union Boards and rents to the *zamindars*. The local administration in early August tried to bring the situation under control by banning the propaganda meetings at important *hats*. But the movement did not stop there, as reports of agitation continued to pour in from different parts of Narail as well as Sadar subdivisions.¹³³ Arrest of some of the organisers might have had a temporary dampening effect on the movement; but their acquittal in September 1941 made the district administration again apprehensive of a 'vigorous renewal of the agitation'. By this time the movement was about to spread to the district of Khulna, where the local CPI leaders had already started a no-toll campaign in the Bagerhat subdivision.¹³⁴

Although the no-toll movement in Jessore-Khulna region did not proceed any further, the situation remained tense. The political

environment in the neighbouring districts of Bakarganj and Faridpur was no different either. In the former district the 'ex-detenus' had been distributing literature 'of an anti-British and communist type' since early 1940. In March a District Peasant Conference was held at Jhalakati, where Nausher Ali was expected to preside. He did not ultimately turn up, as the local Muslim League supporters decided to organise a counter demonstration. But Communist organisation in this district continued and pamphlets marked with hammer and sickle were distributed, containing propaganda against war efforts and against joining the Civic Guards.¹³⁵ In September 1941 'considerable communist activity' was reported from this district and by this time the agrarian situation here also became critical. The condition of the peasantry was seriously affected by a cyclone and even beyond the area directly hit by it, the poor peasants in a wider region in Sadar and Patuakhali subdivisions were reported to be 'suffering seriously'. The result was a number of cases of *hat-looting* and an 'overwhelming increase of crime' in these regions.¹³⁶ This peasant militancy might not have been directly organised by the Communists, but it was definitely related to the political environment of defiance which they had created in recent years. Such activities were also reported since early 1940 from Faridpur, more particularly from Madaripur subdivision, where large quantities of Communist literature were seized. In some areas of this district the activities of the BPKS were leading to agrarian frictions. In other areas there was no confrontation, but Communist propaganda and circulation of leaflets against payment of taxes and rents continued throughout the next year. This organisational effort covered the neighbouring district of Mymensingh as well, where the *bargadars* in Kalihati PS were demanding two-thirds of crop as their share in May 1940.¹³⁷

Such efforts at peasant mobilisation received a great boost when the ban on the Communist Party was lifted in July 1942. The prime motive of the Government of India was 'to allow freedom of action' to 'any party in India . . . prepared to help the prosecution of war' and thus act as a counterweight to 'discredit' the Congress and its 'defeatist tactics'.¹³⁸ Yet the CPI leaders were not prepared to sever immediately all their connections with the Congress. A Communist meeting in Calcutta on 1 August expressed jubilation over the legalisation of the party, set its goal to be the attainment of independence for the country and expressed its veneration for the Congress which had been fighting all along for that same goal.¹³⁹ By May 1942 the Communists had been able, 'to all intents and purposes', to capture the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS),¹⁴⁰ which also continued to support the basic Congress demand for a transfer of

power. Only a true national government, believed Indulal Yagnik, the President of the AIKS, could mobilise the manpower and resources of India necessary to stem the tide of Japanese aggression.¹⁴¹ The Communist propaganda in the Bengal countryside also continued to be anti-British, along with being anti-Fascist and pro-Soviet Union at the same time.¹⁴² Such organisational activities had already been in place at the BPKS Conference held at Domar in Rangpur district on 28–29 June 1942. The general tone of the proceedings, as it appears from an intelligence report, was anti-government; and that they were supporting the war against Fascism in order to destroy imperialism was made clear repeatedly by each and every speaker. The peasants were to be the vanguards of this resistance and they were to be united, irrespective of their religion and party affiliation, through a national government.¹⁴³ It was on this twin note of anti-Fascism and nationalism that Communist propaganda proceeded hereafter. Although Quit India had temporarily stolen the wind from their sails, the BPKS membership within one year rose by more than 256 per cent.¹⁴⁴

In 1943 the issue which the Communist leaders highlighted for peasant mobilisation was the unprecedented food crisis, which many of the Scheduled Caste leaders were deliberately neglecting. In Khulna and Jessore particularly, the Communists held meetings at various places, discussed the food problem, condemned food hoarding and adopted resolutions requesting the government to introduce a rationing system.¹⁴⁵ In spite of this, the CPI had not as yet become as powerful as the other political parties in Bengal, as one Intelligence Officer complacently reported.¹⁴⁶ But its propaganda meetings continued and after the outbreak of the famine its relief work at various places in Presidency and Rajshahi divisions made it more popular among the starving peasants.¹⁴⁷ As a result, by 1945 the CPI had acquired a support base in north Bengal among the Rajbansi peasants. This was amply reflected in the victory in the election of 1946 of a Communist candidate, Rup Narayan Roy, from a Scheduled Caste reserved constituency in Dinajpur, where he defeated an established Kshatriya Samiti candidate Shyama Prasad Barman. There were Communist candidates in five other reserved constituencies as well and they did not fare very badly. Their best gains were of course in the Rajbansi areas of north Bengal. In Jalpaiguri-cum-Siliguri general rural reserved constituency, the Communist candidate got 15.68 per cent of the votes polled, while the former Scheduled Caste minister Upendranath Barman received only 8.74 per cent; in Rangpur the Communist candidate polled 15.68 per cent of the votes as against 8.74 per cent by Kshetra Nath Singha of the Rajbansi

Kshatriya Samiti. In non-Rajbansi areas, the best result was in Mymensingh East, where the Communist candidate received 22.28 per cent of the votes, while the candidate of the Scheduled Caste Federation got only 0.57 per cent. The Communists did not do so well in the Namasudra areas: though in Dacca East reserved constituency their candidate received 11.23 per cent of the votes polled, in Khulna the situation was really bad (2.1 per cent).¹⁴⁸

One thing the election results made clear: the Communist influence had definitely corroded the support base of the Rajbansi caste organisations in north Bengal. Class ideology appeared to have been gradually replacing that of caste and this was amply manifested in course of the subsequent Tebhaga movement. The Namasudra caste consciousness, on the other hand, may appear to have been more enduring; but we should also remember the fact that the Namasudras, though they failed to support the Communists in the elections, did not vote for any candidate of their caste organisations either. They voted for the Congress, which was an umbrella organisation, and many of the local Communists until recently had been operating from within its folds. So the distinction between the 'Congress' and the 'Communists', might not have been very clear to the Namasudra peasant voters. The fact that they too were influenced by the ideology of class and were sensitive to class issues was reflected adequately in their subsequent enthusiastic participation in the Tebhaga movement.

Indeed, as a recent historian of Tebhaga remarks, 'the B.P.K.S. was built on community networks, because they provided accessible structures for organisation'.¹⁴⁹ This was true indeed, if at all, as far as the Rajbansis of north Bengal were concerned. In east Bengal too the participants in the Tebhaga movement came mainly from the Namasudra community. In Faridpur, the movement was confined to the Sadar and Madaripur subdivisions where the sharecroppers were mainly Namasudras.¹⁵⁰ In Madaripur particularly, it was only the Namasudra cultivators in the *bil* areas who were agitated and took the lead and 'compelled' the Muslim cultivators to join the movement.¹⁵¹ In Dacca the main trouble spot was Munshiganj, well-known for Namasudra militancy, while in Bakarganj it was Pirojpur subdivision, where the sharecroppers were mostly Namasudras. In Khulna the agitation had spread to Boitaghata, Dumuria and Bagerhat Police Stations, where the principal participants were again Namasudras. And in Jessore the Tebhaga movement was most successful in what has been described as a 'predominantly Namasudra area', i.e., the Narail subdivision,¹⁵² where the *bargadars* were reported to have carried away

the entire produce to their own places, denying any share whatsoever to the landlords.¹⁵³ In Magura subdivision, the 'movement was confined amongst the Namasudra bargadars of Kuchiamora Union Board' alone, while others showed only lukewarm response.¹⁵⁴ In some of these areas again the attention of the agitators were from time to time deflected, sometimes purposefully, towards their traditional strife with the Muslim neighbours and this no doubt weakened the movement. But this phenomenon also indicated that their loyalties to 'class' and 'community' had remained juxtaposed; neither one replaced the other, nor did the two ever converge.

On the other hand, in the case of the Rajbansis of north Bengal the Tebhaga movement had definitely torn the community apart. In spite of the repeated appeals from their Kshatriya Samiti, the Rajbansi sharecroppers did not hesitate to fight the Rajbansi *jotedars* for their two-thirds share of the produce.¹⁵⁵ Though there is no evidence of any direct intra-community conflict among the Namasudras, their experience was perhaps not very different either, as the upwardly mobile sections of this caste had nothing to do with the sharecroppers' agitation. The members of the *communities*, in other words, had started moving in different, if not always opposite, directions and caste solidarities were being fractured by class confrontations.

Caste identity for the Namasudra peasants, therefore, coexisted with the broader national, class and religious identities. At times one might precede over the others; but this did not mean that the other competing identities were completely displaced. For them their community, under an emaciated and alienated leadership, was no longer a source of power, which they could rely upon to confront a perpetually hostile world. Under new ideological and organisational influences they now began to take new positions within the changing structures of social and political relationships in late colonial Bengal. Their positive responses to the organisational drive of the Kisan Sabhas and their participation in the Tebhaga movement indicated one particular dimension of their integrative mentality, which motivated them to co-operate on class issues with the other landless and small peasants from across the caste and religious boundaries. Their voting behaviour and electoral support for the Congress in 1946 and their responses to the Hindu Mahasabha activities around the same time reflected another dimension of their integrationist mind. This indicated their co-operation with the co-religionists across the class, and also caste, lines and their merger into the Indian, predominantly Hindu, nation, as represented by the Congress-Mahasabha combine in the critical last days of colonial rule. Their notions of community were

thus neither wholly autonomous, nor absolutely static and its boundaries were continually redrawn as they were exposed to and responded to various socio-political realities, ideological influences and organisational mediation.

Conclusion

The Namasudra movement in Bengal is the story of an *antyaja* or low-born caste, transforming itself from an amphibious peripheral multitude, living in the low-lying marshy tracts of eastern Bengal, into a settled agricultural community. They lived mainly in the six eastern districts of Bengal, namely Dacca, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna, where they constituted the largest Hindu agrarian caste. Though referred to as 'untouchables' in the scriptures, they were not strictly treated as such, for untouchability in Bengal was more a political metaphor to assert social authority of the higher castes, than a purely ritual concept. They were not even a well-organised 'caste' at the outset; being known by a generic term 'Chandala', they were divided into numerous endogamous occupational subcastes, with differentiated ranks and real barriers against social interaction and homogenisation. It was from this state of social disorganisation that the Namasudras gradually emerged as a well-organised 'community', successfully challenging the hegemony of the Hindu ritual order and the domination of the high-caste Hindu gentry in east Bengal countryside at the turn of the century.

The rapid reclamation of the marshy wastes in eastern Bengal in the nineteenth century provided them with an economic opportunity to better their lot as pioneer cultivators, while previously they lived primarily on boating and fishing in a region that remained submerged in water for more than six months in a year. As the frontier of cultivation expanded in east Bengal, where the major concentration of the Namasudras could be found, they gradually emerged as a settled agricultural community, and the majority of them came to enjoy the status of peasants. But they had among them only a few landowners, for land in this region remained largely in the hands of the high-caste Hindu and Sayyid Muslim gentry, who provided the capital input for reclamation and therefore appropriated the major share of the surplus

generated by the extension of cultivation. Thus, though differentiated economically, the Namasudras were not so sharply divided as yet, and by and large their caste status converged with their location in the regional class structure. Whatever economic differentiation that had occurred was circumvented through a conscious articulation of a new 'Namasudra' caste identity, constructed on the basis of an ideology of protest against caste domination, and this new identity successfully displaced their old indolent Chandala self at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Their evolution as a peasant community, relatively better off than before, made the Namasudras more conscious of their low ritual position and social degradation, as well as the economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the high-caste Hindus. The tiny prosperous section, those few landowners and rich peasants among them, felt the effects all the more sharply as their caste superiors refused to recognise their claims to a higher social status or treat them as equals. The grievances and the protest mentalities of the Namasudra peasants thus perfectly dovetailed with the frustrated social and political aspirations of their more prosperous leaders, and it was this convergence of disparate streams of consciousness that resulted in the construction of a new self-image of a community that was marked by a commonly shared sense of honour and an attitude of defiance to the social authority of the higher castes. This led to the beginning of the first Namasudra protest movement in Faridpur-Bakarganj region in 1872 in the form of a social and economic boycott of the higher castes. The movement interrogated the relations of power in rural east Bengal, but failed ultimately to alter it to any appreciable extent.

The Namasudra protest movement hereafter developed through a different channel provided by a Vaishnava religious sect called Matua, started by a Namasudra guru in a village in Faridpur. The sect, hitherto almost unknown to the scholars on Vaishnavism, brought in greater solidarity and cohesion within the community. The congregational nature of the sect and the ritual of group singing of devotional songs or *Kirtan*, helped the Namasudra devotees to construct, articulate and continually reinforce a sense of collectivity, and this was possible as the sect remained more or less coterminous with the community. Its philosophical tenets were also determined by this community's cultural and material needs. It therefore selectively and creatively appropriated or adapted ideas and symbols from the existing philosophical discourses. It oscillated in a continuum that had the rationalist universal humanism of the Bengal renaissance at the one end and the heretical radicalism of the deviant religious sects at the other. This prevalence of divergent, and

often antagonistic, ideas within the belief system of the sect was mainly because it was trying to bridge the gulf between different sections within a community, having different aspirations and goals of life. Thus, while on the one hand, it tried to subvert the existing hegemony of the ritual order of caste, it attempted at the same time to generate a rational motivation for accumulation of wealth. Its subversive edge was therefore often blunted by an urge for accommodation and acquiescence. As these people developed their peasant identity, and some of them aspired to be recognised as *bhadralok*, it also became mandatory for them to adopt and internalise the prevalent cultural ethos of the settled agricultural society. Accommodation within the main structure of Hindu society would alone legitimise their new social status and so, they felt the compulsion to conform to the dominant moral and behavioural codes of that society. The Matua sect helped them in this process of acculturation, by undertaking reformation of manners and customs of the community at a mass level. The sect, in other words, facilitated social interaction and communication of ideas across status barriers and thus helped in community formation and articulation of a common collective identity, despite differentiation.

But there was always a common theme in the Namasudra protest movement, and that was an awareness of the relations of power in society, although different sections within the community sought to revise it in widely divergent ways. The upwardly mobile elites, to use the term in the absence of a better one, became more and more educated at the turn of the century and they now evinced an earnest desire to acquire more power through participation in institutional politics, which indeed had become the new determinant of power relations in a colonised indigenous society. They began to aspire for more patronage from the colonial government, which at least theoretically made no distinction of caste. This very aspect of the new regime made it appear in their perception of history as a definite improvement over the traditional rule of the discriminating high-caste Hindu *rajas*. Any political movement to dislodge this government was interpreted as attempts to end this egalitarian rule and bring back the repressive social control of the higher castes. As the British in the early twentieth century recognised the necessity of protective discrimination for the Muslims, it evoked similar expectations in the minds of the informed leaders of the Namasudra community as well. Colonial patronage alone, they believed, could ensure them a position of power and honour within the new polity. This was not political separatism *per se*, but more the result of distrust and alienation from mainstream nationalism under Congress leadership

which did not, until 1917, take note of their grievances and which did not, until 1937-38, seriously consider the necessity of accommodating the political ambitions of these new upwardly mobile lower caste aspirants for political power.

However, in an age marked by the politics of numbers, the Namasudra leadership could hardly move without the peasantry, as it was their backwardness which became the main capital for bargaining with the colonial state. Hence they justified their demand for institutional patronage in the name of social justice and tried to mobilise the majority of the Namasudra peasants still charged with a spirit of protest. In the Namasudra movement, therefore, we find two different levels of protest mentality, one of the elites against low ritual position and continuing exclusion from the sources of wealth and power, and the other of the peasants against social humiliation and economic exploitation. Both had a common object of negation, i.e., the social and political authority of the high-caste Hindus, who were both their caste oppressors and class adversaries. But while the leaders were more involved in institutional politics and more concerned about concessions and privileges from the government, the masses had little idea of the nuances of this modern politics and often took arms against the colonial state, whenever they found it helping their enemies. But most often the government was on their side to counterbalance *bhadralok* nationalism, and this bred among the Namasudra peasantry a sense of dependence and trust in the distant ruler. The nationalists could not dispel this mesmerising influence as they failed to evolve an alternative ideology rooted in mass consciousness.

This failure became apparent when the Namasudras, both the elites and their peasant followers, refused to participate in the nationalist agitation that followed the first partition of Bengal (1905) and actively opposed it on a number of occasions. This was indeed one of the major reasons why the Swadeshi movement, despite early enthusiasm, soon began to lose its momentum in eastern Bengal. Later on, even in the age of Gandhian mass politics, when the appeal of nationalism had been seemingly reaching down to the grassroots level, the Namasudras continued to stay out of the Non-cooperation (1921-22), Civil Disobedience (1929-34) and the Quit India (1942) movements. The political significance of this non-participation will become clear if we keep in mind that they constituted the largest Hindu caste and the majority of the Hindu cultivating population of eastern Bengal. The nationalist leadership was conscious of this critical situation and did in fact make attempts to secure the support of this particular caste. But

success eluded them, as in the case of the Namasudra peasantry, class contradiction had converged with caste hatred and together they created a barrier which the high caste gentry leadership of the nationalist movement in eastern Bengal could not surmount. The Namasudra elites until 1937 could not find anything in the nationalist agenda that could promise them a share of power in the future nation-state, thereby attract them to the struggle for national liberation. The barrier which was thus created between the nationalists and the Namasudras was further reinforced by the British government which, during all these years, had been systematically giving concessions to this particular community in order to ensure their loyalty and alienate them from the nationalists.

The Namasudra movement had in fact become most powerful when the aspirations of its leaders had converged with the grievances of their peasant followers. It was in this social context of convergence that an articulate community consciousness had been constructed on the basis of a common caste identity and it was sustained through manipulation of various symbols and myths. The larger nation still being outside the realm of their imagination, caste appeared to be the most convenient mode of agglomeration, as the Bengali word '*jati*' essentially meant for them a 'caste' and not as yet interchangeably the 'nation'. But then a process of de-imagining the little community also began soon, as the process of divergence set in gradually but unmistakably, within a changing social and political context. As the leadership became more and more involved in constitutional debates, they became divided among themselves and lost interest in the protest movements of the masses, which then began to move into parallel and autonomous domains of action. The leaders now needed the masses much less, as the Act of 1935, had already provided for reserved seats in the legislature for the Scheduled Castes, the Namasudras being the foremost among them in Bengal. The results of the election of 1937 also convinced them that their strength of numbers had already been converted into a position of power within the institutional politics of the province. No political group could any more ignore them and all, the Congress in particular, now tried to appropriate their movement by offering to share power with the leaders. The latter, therefore, found it more convenient to merge into the political mainstream and integrate into the nation, which had always been their ultimate goal, the separatist rhetorics notwithstanding.

The Namasudra peasants also showed remarkable signs of integration, but in strikingly different ways. In the election of 1946 they voted for the Congress, although right from 1905 they had consistently shied away from the Congress-led mass movements. Now they also responded

positively, and in certain areas overwhelmingly, to the Hindu Mahasabha appeal for greater Hindu militancy and its demand for an exclusive Hindu homeland in west Bengal. This clearly signified that they were moving beyond the narrow boundaries of caste and identifying with the larger Hindu community. But paradoxically, around the same time in 1946–47, they also participated in the more class-orientated tenants' and sharecroppers' struggle, the Tebhaga movement, under Communist dominated Kisan Sabha leadership and thus tended to shift from caste and religious allegiances to class affiliations. These apparently contradictory tendencies were, however, some of the longstanding features of Namasudra peasant behaviour, although there had been some interesting mutations and transformation, which shed new light on the nature of community relations at the grass roots level in rural Bengal.

If in the context of South Asian historiography, 'communalism' means Hindu-Muslim conflict, then the Namasudra peasants had been involved in this contest ever since 1889, i.e., about four years before cow-killing riots wrecked the north Indian countryside. Since then, they fought numerous battles (1911, 1923–25, 1938, 1944) with their Muslim neighbours and this violent relationship continued well after 1947. This long history of spasmodic conflict, it is needless to say, helped Hindu Mahasabha to graft the Namasudras into its broader scheme of Hindu mobilisation. But the Namasudra-Muslim relationship was much more complex than simply confrontational; and even when confrontation did occur, religion played a limited role or it was brought in only for *post facto* rationalisation. The two communities, as has been discussed in earlier chapters, fought for the protection and the upholding of the 'honour' of their respective communities. The history of their relationship therefore shed new light on the nature of communalism itself in colonial India. For, interestingly, although conflict was a reality, it was punctuated by numerous instances of co-operation between the Namasudra and Muslim peasants, aligned usually against the upper caste Hindu gentry, their common foe. Social issues like the Namasudras' right to perform puja in a public rostrum erected by the Brahmans and Kayasthas were thus supported by armed bands of Muslim peasants. Occasionally, they also combined to organise social boycott of the higher castes – sometimes by abstaining from menial jobs and sometimes also by refusing to till their lands. The only common theme that could perhaps bind all these perplexing oddities together into one composite frame was their desire for self-respect. It was to affirm their newly acquired respectable self-image that the Muslims and the Namasudras sometimes fought among themselves, sometimes combined to fight their

adversaries and sometimes also challenged the colonial state when it intervened to maintain the status quo. 'Communalism', in the usual narrow sense of the term, can hardly explain all these varied forms of action and inter-community relationship.

On the other hand, if not imbued with a modern socialist ideology, both the Namasudra and Muslim peasantry had their own sense of equity and had been intensely conscious of their own rights. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Namasudras in particular, sometimes also in collaboration with their Muslim neighbours, showed considerable independence of action in mobilising themselves on exclusively peasant issues. They organised movements, without any outside help, for the commutation of high produce rents into easy cash rents in the first decade of this century, or for the two-thirds share of the produce for the sharecroppers in the 1920s, thus anticipating Tebhaga movement almost twenty years before it was actually organised by the Bengal Kisan Sabha. Indeed, it was this articulate peasant consciousness which in the 1930s the Krishak Praja Party first tapped to mobilise the Namasudra and Muslim peasants of eastern Bengal around anti-*zamindari* slogans and demands for tenants' rights. Here, the Communists, or more precisely the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, found a fertile field for organising a militant peasant movement. It was no wonder that the Namasudra and Muslim peasants, apart from the Rajbansis, became the main participants in the Tebhaga movement, although their old mutual rancour persisted and from time to time continued to weaken the movement. Such involvements by the Namasudra peasantry thus clearly showed that it was not caste identity alone that determined their worldviews and that this identity could at times be subservient to other overlapping identities of nation, religion or class. Their notions of 'community', in other words, were by no means static and its boundaries were constantly shifting, depending on their varying responses to changing historical circumstances and ideological influences.

From this particular case study of the Namasudra movement in Bengal between 1872 and 1947 we may arrive at certain general postulates which can be valid for similar other caste or communal movements in colonial India. The basic thesis which this study seeks to establish is that such caste movements were very rarely homogeneous in nature, and therefore no single explanation will suffice. In these movements, at different points in time we may detect various levels of consciousness, different sets of goals and also varied forms of action, yet all encapsulated into one. Thus while the masses may be found to be

concerned more with the perceived threats to community honour, resentment against social disabilities and protest against economic exploitations, the relatively more advanced section within the same group are more concerned with ritual symbols and look for institutional concessions. Both sections in their own ways might think of empowering themselves within the indigenous society. The relationship between the two would usually be symbiotic, as both perhaps feel the same need to 'subvert' the hegemonic ritual order, although their subversive mentalities will be often attenuated by the hegemonic influence of the dominant religious and political ideologies. The mentality of defiance and an urge for social revolution are thus often accompanied by preparedness to accept and accommodate. It is this tendency which indicates that all possibilities of conflict or disjunction, or in fact disintegration of the community, cannot be eliminated, even though at a particular conjuncture the community may appear as a real entity in a political sense.

Indeed, during the colonial period, particularly after the 1930s, when the British government began to patronise such lower caste movements in order to legitimise India's colonial connection, and even later when the transfer of power became imminent in the 1940s, all sorts of realignments began to take shape. In some cases, as in the present one – and parallels will not be difficult to find – the elites among the lower castes allowed themselves to be co-opted into the dominant political structure, while elsewhere they continued their protest against high-caste monopoly of power. The masses also carried on their unfinished battles for social and economic rights, sometimes through the traditional fora of their communities, but sometimes also in alliance with the nationalists, often hand-in-glove with the Hindu communalists, and in some cases around more direct class-based political programmes and organisations. In other words, movements which might once have begun as 'lower caste movements', could subsequently pull in different directions, as various other forms of identities that cut across or encompass the caste identities were constructed or politically articulated.

This does not mean that the putative corporate status of castes was unreal; the disorientation of that status which we talk about here was true only in a political sense. This means that caste identity in India coexisted – and still does co-exist – with other competing religious, class and national identities. At a particular historical conjuncture one might take precedence over others as a focal point for political mobilisation; but this did not mean that other identities were completely displaced or eliminated. In this sense, the nation as an overarching identity can exist

along with its component parts which can retain their distinctiveness; or to put it in another way, the persistence of fragments need not disprove the existence of the nation. Similarly, classes may co-exist with castes; the two may sometimes converge or cut across in other situations. It is this differentiation, and the complexities, rather than the assumed homogeneity and unilinear progress of caste movements, that require investigation. Such probings alone can reveal the true transient nature of caste identity as a factor in Indian society and politics and show that no single standardised public policy, be it the reservationist panacea inherited from the colonial past or the class approach of the orthodox leftists, can address the problems of all the backward castes at a time, fulfil their social aspirations or uplift them from their present conditions, let alone empower them all.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 These terms have been derived, ironically, from what Bernard Cohn has described as a colonial 'discourse of differentiation'. See his 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', in Ranajit Guha, (ed), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Delhi, 1986): 284. The term 'Scheduled Caste', used extensively in contemporary India to identify the ex-untouchables, was devised in 1935 as a more value-free term to replace the earlier 'depressed classes', used to mark out the then untouchables of British India. The term 'Other Backward Classes', recently popularised by the Mandal Commission Report, also seems to be a derivative from the frequently used colonial term 'Backward Classes', used to identify a constantly changing motley group of low-ranking and economically depressed Sudra castes including, but not exclusively, the untouchables as well.
- 2 For such an opinion, see R. Kothari, 'Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 June 1994: 1589-1594; also see Prakash Chandra Upadhyay, 'The Politics of Indian Secularism', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, Part 4, October 1992: 819.
- 3 This development offers a sharp contrast to Tamil regionalism that emerged in the early twentieth century from a pro-reservationist non-Brahman movement. For more details on Tamil separatism and non-Brahman movement, see Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969).
- 4 See for example, M. N. Srinivas, A. M. Shah and B. S. Baviskar, 'Kothari's Illusion of Secular Upsurge', *The Times of India*, 17 October 1990; Dharma Kumar, 'Indian Secularism: A Note', *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 28, Part 1, February 1994: 223.
- 5 For example, Bipan Chandra, who offers this theory of primacy of the 'primary contradiction' in colonial India, also concedes that 'the national movement had to surrender in part before communalism' and that it 'also failed to undertake a cultural revolution despite some advances in the social position of women and lower castes.' See, Bipan Chandra, et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, (New Delhi, 1989): 22-23, 29.

- 6 See for example, B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. I-II, (Bombay, 1946-47); R. C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. I-III, (Calcutta, 1963).
- 7 The recent literature on nationalism in India is now too great to be listed in full. Specifically for Bengal, see, J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968): 321-22; John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930-1939', in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal, (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics. 1870-1940*, (Cambridge, 1973): 278-79; Leonard A. Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, 1876-1940*, (New York, London, 1974): 190, 196, 299; Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927*, (Delhi, 1984): 306.
- 8 Sumit Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, c1905-22', in Ranajit Guha, (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, (Delhi, 1984): 278, 282.
- 9 In recent years some of the good works on the subject are, R. O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, (Cambridge, 1985); E. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movement*, (Delhi, 1993); G. Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 1994); Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, nationalism and communism in south India: Malabar 1900-1948*, (Cambridge, 1994).
- 10 See for example, R. Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*, (Delhi, 1981); G. Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, (Delhi, 1992); Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989); S. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947*, (Delhi, 1991).
- 11 See, for example, F. G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier*, (Delhi, 1958): VII; Robert L. Hardgrave Jr, *The Nadars of Tamilnad*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969): 263; Eleanor Zelliot, 'Learning the Use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra', in R. Kothari, (ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics*, (New Delhi, 1973): 39; D. A. Washbrook, 'The Development of Caste Organisation in South India, 1880 to 1925', in C. J. Baker and D. A. Washbrook, *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880-1940*, (Delhi, 1975): 176-177; Sibsankar Mukherjee, 'The social role of a caste association', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1994: 100.
- 12 M. N. Srinivas, 'Mobility in the Caste System', in M. Singer and B. S. Cohn, (eds.), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, (Chicago, 1968): 194.
- 13 See for example, Kathleen Gough, 'Indian Nationalism and Ethnic Freedom', in David Bidney, (ed), *The Concept of Freedom in Anthropology*, (The Hague, 1963): 174-175; Hetukar Jha, 'Lower caste Peasants and Upper Caste Zamindars in Bihar (1921-1925): An Analysis of Sanskritization and Contradiction between the Two Groups', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. XIV, No. 4, 1977: 556; Gyanendra Pandey, 'Rallying Round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c1888-1917' in Ranajit Guha, (ed), *Subaltern Studies II*, (Delhi, 1983): 71-74.
- 14 Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 14.

- 15 Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness', in Ranajit Guha, (ed), *Subaltern Studies VI*, (Delhi, 1989).
- 16 M. S. S. Pandian, "'Denationalising' the Past: 'Nation' in E. V. Ramasamy's Political Discourse", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 October 1993: 2282–2287.
- 17 For a discussion on problems and utility of census data for studying social history of religion and caste in India, see Frank Conlon, 'The Census of India as a Source for the Historical Study of Religion and Caste', in N. G. Barrier, (ed), *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, (New Delhi, 1981).
- 18 This is a complaint raised recently by David Rudner against the interpretation offered by David Washbrook and others. See his *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1994): 17–19.
- 19 See, for example, J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, 31, 158–60, 236–37; John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930–39', 278–279; Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*, (New Delhi, 1977): 330–331, 392; Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*, 306.
- 20 Sandria Freitag has defined this 'ideological community', which develops out of a 'relational' form of community based on 'personalized connections', as 'encompassing participants through inclusive but abstracted ideological appeals and terms of reference'. See her entry on 'Community' in P. N. Stearns, (ed), *Encyclopedia of Social History*, (New York and London, 1994): 160. For more elaboration of the concept within the specific context of north India, see her *Collective Action and Community*, 5, 13, 88.
- 21 Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926–35', in Ranajit Guha, (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I*, (Delhi, 1982): 11.
- 22 James C. Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', in F. D. Colburn, (ed.), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New York, 1989): 27; for more elaboration of the point, see his *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven, 1985).
- 23 For a theoretical discussion on this phenomenon and a critique of Scott, see Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, (Delhi, 1991), Introduction, especially pp. 10–11.
- 24 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation And Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*, (Princeton, 1993): 197.
- 25 Peter Robb, 'Introduction', in P. Robb, (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, (Delhi, 1993): 65.
- 26 See for details, Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*.
- 27 Georges Duby, 'Heresies and Societies in Preindustrial Europe between the Eleventh and Eighteenth Centuries', in *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, translated by Jane Dunnett, (Cambridge, 1994): 185.
- 28 For a more detailed discussion on this aspect of colonial census, see B. S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, (Delhi, 1987); Kenneth W. Jones, 'Religious Identity and the Indian Census' in N. Gerald Barrier, (ed), *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*; S. Bandyopadhyay, 'Construction of Social Categories: The Role of the Colonial Census', in K. S. Singh, (ed), *Ethnicity, Caste and People*, (New Delhi, 1992).

- 29 Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, (Cambridge, 1987): 5.

1 THE NAMASUDRAS: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

- 1 The second word, *namate*, is not in use in modern Bengali in the same sense any more and therefore it is difficult to say wherefrom did Risley get it or what actually did it mean.
- 2 See H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, (London, 1891, Reprint, Calcutta, 1981), Vol. I: 183, note 3; Sashi Kumar Badoi Biswas, *Namasudra Dviija Tattwa*, (The theory of the Namasudras' twice born status), (Barisal, 1317 BS): 95–96; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, (The Namasudra community and Bengal), (Calcutta, 1368 BS): 68.
- 3 *Census of India*, 1901, Vol. VI, Part I: 395–396, 459; Vol. VIA, Part II, Table XIII: 246. The 1901 census shows that the Namasudras were the third largest group in Bengal Proper; but in this census the Rajbansi and the Koch had been bracketed together and this had placed them at the top. Subsequently these two groups separated themselves from each other and were also enumerated separately, which pushed the Namasudras to the second position, next to the Mahishyas. Also see, *Bengal District Gazetteers*, B Volume, (Calcutta, 1933), for the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna; H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I: 189; Jogeshchandra Pal, 'Bangalar Hindu', (The Hindus of Bengal), *Bangabani*, Vol. 5: 2nd Half, No. 4, Aগ্রহায়ণ 1333 BS: 398–400; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, 1.
- 4 Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam*, (Delhi, 1984): 51–54, 139, 164.
- 5 Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford, 1990): 62ff.
- 6 For details see, Andre Beteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective*, (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1991): 57–78.
- 7 Gobinda Chandra Basak, *Bangiya Jatimala*, (The Castes of Bengal), (Second edition, Dacca, 1318 BS): 67.
- 8 Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, 62.
- 9 H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I: 183–185; also see, E. A. Gait, 'Caste', in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethic*, Second edition, 1932, Vol. III: 231.
- 10 James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, (London, 1883): 257.
- 11 Birendranath Basu, *Purbabange Palrajgan*, (The Pala kings in east Bengal), (Dacca, 1320 BS): i, 1, 16, 19; Jatindramohan Ray, *Dhakar Itihas*, (History of Dacca), Vol. II, (Calcutta, 1322 BS): 471–72.
- 12 Vivekananda Jha, 'Candala and the Origin of Untouchability', *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. XIII, Nos. 1–2, July–January 1986–87: 1–36.
- 13 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1993): 118–129.
- 14 Jogeschandra Pal, 'Bangalar Hindu', 397.
- 15 Premen Addy and Ibne Azad, 'Politics and Society in Bengal', in Robin

- Blackburn, (ed.), *Explosion in a Subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Ceylon*, (Harmondsworth, 1975): 81.
- 16 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 306–311.
- 17 Narendranath Bhattacharya, *Bharatiya Jativarna Pratha*, (Caste and varna system of India), (Calcutta, 1987): 132.
- 18 D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, (Bombay, 1956): 25.
- 19 N. K. Bose, 'The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption', *Science and Culture*, Vol. VII, 1941: 188–94.
- 20 Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangali Hindur Varnabhed*, (Varna divisions among the Bengali Hindus), (Calcutta, 1352 BS): 104.
- 21 Gobinda Chandra Basak, *Bangiya Jatimala*, 67
- 22 *Brihaddharmapurana*, edited by H. P. Shastri, Bibliotheca Indica, Asiatic Society of Bengal, (Calcutta, 1888): 578; *Brhmavaivarttapuranam*, edited by Panchanan Tarkaratna, (Calcutta, 1391 BS): 22, 25–27.
- 23 Bani Chakraborti, *Samaj Sanskarak Raghunandan*, (Social reformer Raghunandan), (Second revised edition, Calcutta, 1970): 33, 256–261.
- 24 Mukundaram in *Chandimangala* clearly mentions 'Chandala nibase pure', i.e., the Chandalas live in the city; see, Mukundaram, *Chandimangala*, edited by Sukumar Sen, (New Delhi, 1975): 81; also see, Bharatchandra, *Annadaman-gala*, in *Bharatchandra Granthabali*, edited by Brojendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajani Kanta Das, (Third edition, Calcutta, 1369 BS): 171.
- 25 Indian Statutory Commission, *Memorandum Submitted by the Government of Bengal to the Indian Statutory Commission*, Vol. VIII, (London, 1930): 141.
- 26 Report [of the enquiry] by H. E. Stapleton, D. P. I., Bengal, to Secy., GB, Education Dept., 22 March 1929, GB, Appointment (Appointment) Dept, File No. 5M-114 of 1928, February 1930, Progs. Nos. 7–20, WBSA; for other historical reasons behind this phenomenon, see my *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872–1937*, (Calcutta, 1990): 8–11.
- 27 Haris Chandra Chakraborti, *Bhranti Bijaya*, (Victory over the errors), (Andul, Howrah, 1319 BS): 166–167.
- 28 Indian Statutory Commission: Oral Evidence – Bengal, Vol. II.
- 29 Gobinda Chandra Basak, *Bangiya Jatimala*, (The castes of Bengal), Part I, (Mymensingh, 1901): 108, 113–114; Lalmohan Vidyanidhi, *Sambandhanir-naya*, (Determination of relationships), (Calcutta, nd): 130.
- 30 Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam*, 52.
- 31 The surnames which the Namasudras used in Bengal were: Bag, Bhal, Biswas, Das, Gantak, Dhali, Dule, Hait, Hazra, Halder, Hati, Haoikar, Khan, Laskar, Mahara, Majumdar, Mandal, Majhi, Beerdada, Mistri, Namdhani, Pradhan, Pandit, Pramanik, Sumardar, Patra, Phalia, Ray, Santra, Sena, Shiuli, Sinha, Tangra. See, Panchanan Mandal, *Chithipatre Samjchitra*, (Society as reflected in letters), Vol. I, 2nd Half, (Santiniketan, 1985): 98.
- 32 Deputy Magistrate, Faridpur to H.H.Risley, 9 August 1886; Note by Jagadish Chandra Rai, District Engineer, Faridpur, 'Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes', Vol. VI: 128, 130, 133, Mss. Eur. E. 101, IOL.
- 33 Note by H.C.Rae to Risley, 4.8.86; Note by Aswini Kumar Basu to Risley, 3.12.86; Note by Subdivisional Officer, Narail, Jessore; Note by Deputy

- Collector and Magistrate, Magura, Jessore, 'Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes', Vol. VI: 59, 60, 103, 117.
- 34 Note by Deputy Magistrate, Mymensingh, 'Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes', Vol. VI: 136.
- 35 Haridas Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmee*, (A worker among the backward castes of Bengal), (Calcutta, 1322 BS): 1-3, 8, 14-15.
- 36 Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, (Delhi, 1987): 224-254.
- 37 Kaliprasanna Biswas, *Jatibibaran*, (A description of castes), (Rangpur, 1319 BS): 20, 23; Panchanan Mandal, *Chithipatre Samajchitra*, (Society as reflected in letters), Vol. I, 1st half, (Santiniketan, 1968): 160; Petition of the Dacca District Namasudra Jajak Brahman Association to the Viceroy and Governor General of India, 26 June 1946, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 115/46-R, NAI.
- 38 Note by H.C.Rae to Risley, 4.8.86, 'Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes', Vol. VI: 103; I.T.Rankin, Collector of Dacca, to the Supdt. of Census Operations, Bengal, 20 December 1901, 'Papers, 1901-1911 of Sir Herbert Hope Risley', [hereafter Risley Papers], Vol. I: 382-83, Mss. Eur. E. 295/1, IOL.
- 39 Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya, *Hindur Nabajagaran*, (Reawakening of the Hindus), (Calcutta, 1338 BS): 73-74.
- 40 H.LeMesurier, Commissioner, Dacca Divn., to Secy., GEB&A, Judicial Dept., 24 April 1909, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 304 of 1911, WBSA; Jogendranath Gupta, *Bikrampurur Bibaran*, (A description of Bikrampur), Vol. I, (Dacca, 1326 BS): 233. Mukunda Behari Mullick in his oral evidence before the Indian Statutory Commission in January 1929 observed: 'They [the depressed classes] live in the villages, but they have got their own localities, what are called *pattis*, *pallis*, *paras* and so on. They do not live side by side with the caste Hindus . . . These are known as *Muchi pallis*, *Chandal paras* and so on . . .' See, Indian Statutory Commission: Oral Evidence - Bengal, Vol. II.
- 41 Haridas Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmee*, 2-3.
- 42 Madhusudan Sarkar, 'Sparshadosh Prathar Rakshashi Murti', (The demonic features of the custom of untouchability), *Nabyabharat*, Vol. 12, No. 12, Chaitra 1301 BS: 641-643
- 43 Sarat Kumar Ray, *Mahatma Aswini Kumar*, (Aswini Kumar the great soul), (Calcutta, 1333 BS): 97-98.
- 44 There is another story which was narrated to me by the late Dr Hitesranjan Sanyal during one of our numerous informal meetings. This is from his own childhood in eastern Bengal in mid-twentieth century, shortly before the Partition, when he himself, being the son of a Brahman zamindar, had to cross the muddy village tracts on the shoulders of one of their Namasudra tenants. And this was, as he told me, a common practice in the marshy areas of east Bengal and people did not have to bathe immediately for touching a Namasudra. Yet the latter were referred to as untouchables.
- 45 For more evidence of such behaviour, see Haridas Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmee*, 8; Kalinganath Ghosh, 'Mahatma Gandhi O Bartaman Hindu Samaj', (Mahatma Gandhi and the contemporary Hindu society), *Bangabani*, Vol. 4:1st half, No. 3, Baisakh 1332 BS: 319; Benoy Kumar Sarkar, 'Hajar-

- bhuja Bangali*', (The Bengalees with thousand hands), in Sushil Ray, (ed.), *Bangaprasanga*, (Calcutta, 1365 BS): 278.
- 46 Shyamlal Sen Munshi, *Jatitattwa – vivek*, (The essence of the theory of caste), (Barisal, 1797 Saka): 42, 57, 143; Haripada Barman Mandal, *Jati-bibaran*, (A description of castes), (Salkia, Howrah, 1914): 48; Gobinda Chandra Basak, *Bangiya Jatimala*, 115; Ramcharan Tarkaratna and Bhagabaticharan Nyayabhushan, *Uddipan*, (The awakening), (Tajpur, Midnapur, 1318 BS): 9; Bhagabati Charan Pradhan, *Arya Prabha*, (The glory of the Aryans), (Tamluk, 1318 BS): 10; Jogeshchandra Dasgupta, *Jati-bikas ba Chudamoni-tattwa*, (A treatise on the development of castes), (Rangpur, 1319 BS): 67; Kaliprasanna Biswas, *Jatibibaran*, 52–53; Rohini Kumar Sen, *Bakla*, (Barisal, 1915): 36–37; Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay, *Jati-bijnan*, (Science of caste), (Jaynagar, 24–Parganas, 1321 BS): 82; Pitambar Sarkar, *Jati Bikas*, (Development of castes), (Calcutta, 1910): 76.
- 47 Indian Statutory Commission, *Memoranda submitted by the Government of India and the India Office to the Indian Statutory Commission*, Vol. V, Part II, (London, 1930): 1360.
- 48 These various subcastes, according to Risley's enumeration, were: Halwah, Ghasi, Kandho (or Behara), Karral (or Keral), Bari, Berua, Pod, Baqqal, Saralya, Amarabadi, Bachhar, Sandwipa in eastern Bengal; Dhani, Jalia, Jiani (or Jiuni), Karal, Nunia, Siali in central Bengal; Chasi, Helo, Jelo, Kesarkalo, Kotal, Majila, Nalo, Nunia, Panphule, Saro, Siule in western Bengal. See H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. II, Appendix I: 34.
- 49 *Ibid*, Vol. I: 185–186.
- 50 E. A. Gait to all District Magistrates, 14 August 1901; Magistrate of Jessore to Suptd. of Census, Bengal, 3 March 1902; H. W. Seroope, Offcg. Magistrate, Khulna, to Suptd. of Census Operations, Bengal, 16 October 1901; I. T. Rankin, Collector of Dacca, to Suptd. of Census Operations, Bengal, 20 December 1901; Note by Ramani Mohan Das, Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector of Mymensingh, appended to N. Bonham Carter, Magistrate, Mymensingh to Suptd. of Census Operations, Bengal, 26 March 1902; Note by Girish Chandra Sarkar, Deputy Magistrate, Faridpur, appended to K. C. De, Magistrate of Faridpur, to Supdt. of Census Operations, Bengal, 15 December 1901; Note by Hiranya Kumar Dasgupta, Sub-Deputy Magistrate, Bakarganj, appended to N.D.Beatson Bell, Magistrate of Backergunge, to Suptd. of Census Operations, Bengal, 7 October 1901; Risley Papers, Vol. I: 305, 309, 371, 382–386, 395, 418–421, 431.
- 51 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, (A biography of Guruchand), (Calcutta, 1943): 119–120.
- 52 Raicharan Biswas, *Jatiya Jagaran*, (The awakening of a caste), (Calcutta, 1921): 10.
- 53 Irawati Karve, *Hindu Society – An Interpretation*, (Third edition, Poona, 1977): 19.
- 54 Lalmohan Vidyanidhi, *Sambandhanirnaya*, 133.
- 55 R. G. Hobbes, 'Scenes in the Cities & Wilds of Hindostan', Vol. I, (1852): 353–54, Mss. Eur. B. 260, IOL.
- 56 *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II: 370–373, Table No. XVI; Bakarganj DG: 35; Bakarganj DC, 1891: 7; Faridpur DC, 1891: 12–13; Dacca DC, 1891: 14; Mymensingh DC, 1891: 14–15; Jessore DC, 1891: 7.

- 57 Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, social structure and politics, 1919–1947*, (Cambridge, 1986): 19.
- 58 Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920–1947: The Land Question*, (Calcutta, 1984): 142–43, 146–47, 150.
- 59 H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I: 188; Faridpur SR: 91.
- 60 *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II: 370–373, Table No. XVI.
- 61 Bakarganj DC, 1891: 7; Faridpur DC, 1891: 12–13; Dacca DC, 1891: 14; Jessore DC, 1891: 7; Bakarganj SR: 46, 87; H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj: Its History and Statistics*, (London, 1876): 190; Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c.1760–1850*, (New Delhi, 1979): 210–211.
- 62 *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II: 379, Appendix to Table XVI, Part II.
- 63 Supdt. of Police, Faridpur, to Asstt.I.G. of Police, Bengal, 23 July 1925, GB, Police, File No. P5R/2(4–12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. Nos. 95–103, WBSA; also see, Sitanath Biswas, *Jatitattwa O Namasyakulodarpan*, (A theory of caste and the history of Namasudra lineage), (Dacca, 1931): 31; Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 19 and *passim*.
- 64 Partha Chatterjee has argued that a similar thing had happened among the Muslim peasantry of eastern Bengal as well; see his *Bengal 1920–1947*, 187.
- 65 J. E. Gastrell, *Geographical and Statistical Report of the Districts of Jessore, Furreedpore and Backergunge*, (Calcutta, 1869): 17–34.
- 66 Bakarganj SR: 6–10; Bakarganj DG: 54, 131, 142, 164.
- 67 Faridpur SR: 4–5.
- 68 Jessore SR: 13; Hiralal Bhattacharya, *Jasohar Khulnar Itihas*, Part I, (History of Jessore and Khulna), (Narail, Jessore, 1321 BS): 43.
- 69 Khulna DG: 91, 93, 100; Hiralal Bhattacharya, *Jasohar Khulnar Itihas*, 43.
- 70 Jatindramohan Ray, *Dhakar Itihas*, Vol. I, (History of Dacca), (Calcutta, 1319 BS): 81–87; Durga Chandra Sanyal, *Bangalar Samajik Itihas*, (Social history of Bengal), (Calcutta, 1317 BS): 55–56; Krishnamohan Dhar, *Purbabanga O Assam Pradesher Sankshipta Bibaran*, (A brief description of the province of East Bengal and Assam), (Dacca, 1911): 99.
- 71 J. E. Gastrell, *Geographical and Statistical Report*, 36; Bakarganj DG: 48–49; Faridpur SR: 11; Jessore DG: 3, 68; Khulna DG: 90.
- 72 Bakarganj DG: 72–73; Faridpur SR: 31; Khulna DG: 108–109.
- 73 Jessore DG: 82–83.
- 74 *Ibid.*: 84–85.
- 75 Khulna DG: 112.
- 76 For a detailed discussion on the peasant smallholding system of east Bengal, see Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 18–28.
- 77 Faridpur SR: 29; Bakarganj SR: 68; Bakarganj DG: 97; Jessore SR: 64.
- 78 Faridpur SR: 15, 33–34.
- 79 *Ibid.*: 20–22; also see, Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Permanent Settlement in Operation: Bakarganj District, East Bengal', in Robert Frykenberg, (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, (Wisconsin, 1969): 168.
- 80 Faridpur SR: 29, 39; Bakarganj DC, 1891: 8; Bakarganj DG: 73; Jessore SR: 123.
- 81 Bakarganj SR: 70, 168; Bakarganj DG: 73; Faridpur SR: 31–32; Jessore SR: 113; Jessore DG: 83; for a description of how *dhankarani* rents were popular among the high caste gentry of Bakarganj in the early twentieth century, see, Rohini Kumar Sen, *Bakla*, 124–125.

- 82 M. M. Islam, *Bengal Agriculture, 1920-1946: A Quantitative Study*, (New Delhi, 1978): 166, 177.
- 83 Faridpur SR: 37; Bakarganj DG: 77; Jessore SR: 71.
- 84 *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II: 370-373, Table XVI; Haridas Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmee*, 9-10, 14-16, 40-43, 128.
- 85 Faridpur SR: 25; Jessore DG: 84-85, 119; H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj*, 192; Radha Kamal Mukherjee, *Bangla O Bangali*, (Bengal and the Bengalees), (Calcutta, 1347 BS): 77; Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 266, 473-75; Sitanath Biswas, *Jatitattva O Namasyakulodarpan*, 132-148; Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Permanent Settlement in Operation', 167-68; Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, 211.
- 86 J. E. Gastrell, *Geographical and Statistical Report*, 15.
- 87 Kedarnath Mazumdar, *Dhakar Bibaran*, (A description of Dacca), (Mymensingh, 1910): 100.
- 88 Bakarganj DG: 50; Jessore DG: 70-71; Faridpur SR: 15-16; Anandanath Ray, *Faridpurur Itihas*, (History of Faridpur), (Calcutta, 1316 BS), Vol. I: 16-17; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, 3; for a more detailed discussion on the jute economy in east Bengal, see Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 55-58, 63, 72-77, 79-83.
- 89 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 61-65, 98-100; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, 4; Rohini Kumar Sen, *Bakla*, 36; Rajkumar Chakrabarti and Anangamohan Das, *Sandwiper Itihas*, (History of Sandwip), (Sandwip, Noakhali), 1330 BS): 159; C. S. Mead, *The Namasudras and Other Addresses*, (Adelaide, 1911): 59.
- 90 *Census of India*, 1901, Vol. VI, Part I: 309-310; *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part I: 359-360.
- 91 Faridpur DC, 1891: 13.
- 92 *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II, Table XVI: 370-373; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, 33.
- 93 *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II, Table XVI: 370-373.
- 94 For details on this traditional medical practice, see Anandachandra Bhakta, *Chandshir Doktor Bangsa-mangal*, (An account of the medical practitioners of Chandshi), (Chandshi, Barisal, 1313 BS): 3ff; Keshabchandra Das, 'Chandshir Chikitsa', (The system of Chandshi treatment), *Nabyabharat*, Vol. 37, No. 5, Bhadra 1316 BS: 223-224; Vol. 37, No. 7, Kartik 1326 BS: 329; Vol. 37, No. 10, Magh 1326 BS: 474-475; Vol. 38, No. 6, Kartik 1327 BS: 326-328.
- 95 *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. V, Part II, Imperial Table XI: 156-157.
- 96 This is an approximate figure derived from a computation of occupation data given in Table XVI in *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II: 370-373. How far census data on caste are reliable is a question raised by Frank Conlon. But when they indicate so overwhelmingly a particular trend, it is difficult to ignore this evidence. See, Frank F. Conlon, 'The Census of India as a Source for the Historical Study of Religion and Caste', in N. Gerald Barrier, (ed.), *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, (New Delhi, 1981).
- 97 For details of this middle peasant theory see, Hamza Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution', *The Socialist Register*, 1965: 241-75; Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century*, (New York, 1969): 289-93.
- 98 Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, 38.

- 99 James wise, *Notes on the Races*, 194, 256.
- 100 'Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes', Vol. VI: 128.
- 101 'Caste File No. III': 100,104,115, Mss. Eur. D. 191, IOL.

2 BEGINNINGS OF SOCIAL PROTEST AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE COMMUNITY, c1872-1905

- 1 Jogeschandra Pal, 'Banglar Hindu', (The Hindus of Bengal), *Bangabani*, Vol. 5 (2nd half), No. 4, Agrahayan 1333 BS: 397-398; Rohini Kumar Sen, *Bakla*, (Barisal, 1915): 290; Premen Addy and Ibne Azad, 'Politics and Society in Bengal', in Robin Blackburn, (ed.), *Explosion in a Subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Ceylon*, (Harmondsworth, 1975): 81.
- 2 C. S. Mead, *The Namasudras and Other Addresses*, (Adelaide, 1911): 76, italics original; also see, H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj: Its History and Statistics*, (London, 1876): 260-265; more on missionary activities later in this chapter.
- 3 Edward C. Dimock Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaishnava Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, (Chicago and London, 1966): 71-72, 77.
- 4 Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1981): 29, 58-59; 'Trends of Change in the Bhakti Movement in Bengal', Occasional Paper No. 76, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1985.
- 5 Edward C. Dimock Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 68-71, 78-81.
- 6 Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1985): 321-322, 333.
- 7 Quoted in Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, (History of Gaudiya Vaishnavism), (Hooghli, 1333 BS): 329. Tattwabachaspati rationalised this situation by giving a novel interpretation of Chaitanya's message. According to him, Chaitanya had asked his disciples to work for the emancipation of the downtrodden, but not to mix with them (p. 369).
- 8 Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, 90, 322.
- 9 Edward C. Dimock Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 70-71, 82-83.
- 10 Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, 321, 325, 328-335, 339-340; J. N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, (Second edition, Calcutta, 1968): 160, 185-186, 195, 200-212, 280, 367-369.
- 11 H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, (First published London, 1891; Reprint, Calcutta, 1981), Vol. I: 187.
- 12 H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj*, 260-265.
- 13 Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, 399; Jogendranath Gupta, *Bikrampur Itihas*, (History of Bikrampur), (Calcutta, 1316 BS): 370-371.
- 14 'Some Aspects of Popular Hinduism, [Dacca]', File 32 mis.D, Paper No. 26, Diary No. 341, Note 1, Risley Papers, Vol. 6: 626, Mss. Eur. E. 295, IOL.
- 15 Jasimuddin, *Murshida Gaan*, (Murshida songs), (Dacca, 1977): 36-42, 259, 262.
- 16 Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vashnava Itihas*, 405.
- 17 James C. Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', in F. D. Colburn, (ed), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New York, 1989): 27.
- 18 Yogendranath Gupta, *Bikrampur Itihas*, 371; Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, 403-405; Narendranarayan Raychaudhuri, *Samaj-chitra*, (Social sketches), (Calcutta, 1322 BS): 117.

- 19 SP to Magistrate of Faridpur, 18 March 1873, GB, Judicial, March 1873, Progs. No. 179, WBSA.
- 20 For more details on the concept of 'Sanskritisation', see M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967): 1-45.
- 21 SP to Magistrate of Faridpur, 18 March 1873, *op. cit.*
- 22 *Ibid*; also, Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 8 April 1873, GB, Judicial, May 1873, Progs. No. 57, WBSA.
- 23 Magistrate, Faridpur to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 8 April 1873, *op. cit.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Offg. Commissioner, Dacca Divn., to Secy, GB, Judicial Dept., 14 April 1873, GB, Judicial, May 1873, Progs. No. 56, WBSA.
- 26 Inspector General of Jails, Lower Provinces, to Secy, GB, Judicial Dept., 22 May 1873, GB, Judicial, June 1873, Progs. No. 84; Jr. Secy, GB, to Inspector General of Jails, 7 June 1873, GB, Judicial, June 1873, Progs. No. 87, WBSA.
- 27 Emergence of such popular religious sects among the protesting lower castes and untouchables was not a very unusual phenomenon in colonial India. The more well-known examples of these are the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam among the Iravas (or Ezhavas) of Kerala, the Shiva Narayana sect among the Chamars of Uttar Pradesh, the Ad Dharam among the untouchables of Punjab and the Adi Hindu cult among the untouchables of urban Uttar Pradesh in early twentieth century. For more details see, R. Jeffrey, 'The Social Origins of a Caste Association, 1875-1905: The Founding of the SNDP Yogam', *South Asia*, No. 4, 1974: 39-59; Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste' and 'The Changing Traditions of a Low Caste', reprinted in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, (Delhi, 1987); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982); Nandini Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour: Untouchable Social Movements in Urban Uttar Pradesh in the Early Twentieth Century', in P. Robb, (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, (Delhi, 1993).
- 28 Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, (Philosophy of Matua religion), (Thakurnagar, 1393 BS): 47; Nityananda Haldar, *Srihari Darshan*, (Philosophy of Harichand), (Faridpur, 1392 BS): 54.
- 29 *Ibid*; also Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, (An account of the life and teachings of Harichand), (Faridpur, 1323 BS): 13, 23, 59-60, 66-67, 107.
- 30 B. R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millenium*, (London, 1973): 499; for a recent discussion on charisma, see Roy Wallis, 'Charisma and Explanation' and Eileen Barker, 'Charismatization: The Social Production of "an Ethos Propitious to the Mobilisation of Sentiments"', in E. Barker, J. A. Beckford and K. Dobbelaere, (eds.), *Secularization, Rationalism and Sectarianism*, (Oxford, 1993).
- 31 A. M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in Later Middle Ages*, (Chicago and London, 1992): 152-153.
- 32 Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, 74-75, 78-79.
- 33 *Ibid*: 85-86; Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Ki-O-Keno*, (What and why is Matua religion), (Thakurnagar, 1394 BS): 1-4, 6-7; Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 67.

- 34 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 107; Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, 157–158, 163.
- 35 Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, (The substance of Matua religious theories), (Thakurnagar, 1393 BS): 90; also his *Srihari Darshan*, 54.
- 36 Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Ki-O-Keno*, 7.
- 37 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, (A biography of Guruchand), (Calcutta, 1943): 72, 203, 360.
- 38 Nityananda Haldar, *Srihari Darshan*, 112–113.
- 39 '*Harichander anuchar hoyechhe nana varna ekanna*'. Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Mahasamkirtan*, (Collection of devotional songs), (Ninth edition, Thakurnagar, 1394 BS): 69.
- 40 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 107.
- 41 '*Brahman Chandal Tanti Jola Muchi Hadi jatigo Sab milechhe bolchhe Hari go*'. [Brahman, Chandal, Tanti, Jola, Muchi, Hadi castes have all been united and they are all chanting the name of Hari.] Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Mahasamkirtan*, 31.
- 42 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 203; also see, Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, 158–159.
- 43 A Brahman commentator in the early twentieth century describes the position of the guru in following words:
'*Guruh pita gururmata gururdeva gururgatih, Sive rushte grustrata gurou rushte na kaschana.*'
[Guru is father, mother and God, and the only person to be followed. If Siva is angry, the guru can protect, but if the guru is angry nobody can.]
Chintaharan Chattopadhyay, *Brahman*, (Faridpur, 1317 BS): 70–71.
- 44 Quoted in Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, 196–197; translation author's.
- 45 Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, 81–82, 321.
- 46 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 24, 73.
- 47 Mahananda Haldar, *Guruchand Charit*, 14; Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, 33.
- 48 '*Kaj ki amar mantrabije Harichand-chhabi rabir kirane uthalilo madhu hritsaroje.*'
[What for do I need the mantra, when the portrait of Harichand has been glittering in sun light in the lotus of my heart?]
Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Mahasamkirtan*, 59.
'*Gururupe Hari tumi, ese samsare, Tumi Hari hoye Hari bole, nam dila sakalare.*'
[Lord Hari, you have come on earth as the guru. You being Hari yourself, chant the exalted name of Hari and give mantra to everybody.]
Matua Sangeet, (Songs of the Matua sect), Part I, compiled by Matua Mahasangha, (Sixth edition, Thakurnagar, 1393 BS): 65.
'*Jaya jagatbandhu Guruchandrahe, Namasudra kuloddharan kripasindhe.*'
[Hail Guruchand, the friend of all on earth, the ocean of mercy, the deliverer of the Namasudras!]
Matua Sangeet, 11.
- 49 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 23, 69, 315.
- 50 *Ibid*: 573; also, Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 73.

- 51 For examples, see note 48.
- 52 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, (Ithaca, 1974): 285.
- 53 For a recent discussion on such collective rituals, see, Gerd Baumann, 'Ritual implicates "Others": rereading Durkheim in a plural society', in Daniel de Coppet, (ed.), *Understanding Rituals*, (London, New York, 1993): 97-116.
- 54 Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itihas*, (A history of Bengali kirtan), (Calcutta, 1989): 20-30, 38-46, 240-246.
- 55 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Mahasamkirtan*, 2.
- 56 *Matua Sangeet*, 10.
- 57 *Ibid*: 18.
- 58 *Ibid*: 12.
- 59 *Ibid*: 20.
- 60 *Ibid*: 134.
- 61 As Barry Reay argues, popular religion, in a 'wider sense' means 'quite simply the religion of the vast mass of people; popular in the sense of "widely favoured"'; but it also incorporates its 'narrower usage', i.e., religion as an 'oppositional form', conceived to contest the dominant ideologies of the religion of the elites. See his article, 'Popular Religion', in Barry Reay, (ed), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England*, (London, 1988): 91.
- 62 Vedanta literally means the 'end of the Veda', i.e., a system of knowledge based on the *Upanishads*, which a Vedic student studies at the very end.
- 63 See D. H. Killingley, 'Vedanta and Modernity', in C. H. Philips and M. D. Wainwright, (eds.), *Indian Society and the Beginning of Modernisation c.1830-1850*, (London, 1976): 129ff.
- 64 Sumit Sarkar, however, thinks that it was his *bhadralok* devotees who put on a 'monistic Vedantic stamp' on Ramakrishna 'who on the whole seems to have preferred the ways of dualistic devotion'. This observation further confirms the centrality of Vedanta in the religious discourse of the Bengali Hindu elites. It was in Vivekananda, however, that we find a full shift to Vedantic monism. See Sumit Sarkar, "Kaliyuga", "Chakri" and "Bhakti": Ramakrishna and His Times', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, No. 29, 18 July 1992: 1555.
- 65 Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itihas*, 43.
- 66 Nityananda Haldar, *Srihari Darshan*, 38-39.
- 67 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 24, 73.
- 68 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 165.
- 69 Nityananda Haldar, *Srihari Darshan*, 127.
- 70 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 74, 442, 569.
- 71 Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, translated and edited by H.H.Gerth and D.Martindale, (Second edition, Glencoe, Illinois, 1960): 328; Ramakanta Chakraborti has also argued in favour of the validity of the Weberian thesis in relation to the *bhakti* movement. See his *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, 84.
- 72 Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, 122-23.
- 73 This tendency could be found in other lower castes' and untouchables' movements as well. See for details, Robert Deliege, 'The Myths of Origin of the Indian Untouchables', *Man*, Vol. 28, No. 3, September 1993: 533-34.
- 74 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 24; Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, 129, 288.

- 75 Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, 17; Srihari Darshan, 94.
- 76 Most abhorring to Ramakrishna were Kamini or women as representations of lust, the bondage of *chakri* or office job and what mediated between the two, i.e., *kanchan* or literally gold or wealth. See Sumit Sarkar, "'Kaliyuga', 'Chakri' and 'Bhakti' . . .", 1549.
- 77 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 24; Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 2, 236, 251; Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, 322.
- 78 *Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan ba Gathantantra*, (Constitution of the Matua Mahasangha), (Second edition, Thakurnagar, 1988): 5–6.
- 79 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 567–68.
- 80 See note 18.
- 81 For a more detailed discussion on this aspect of the reform of popular culture, see, Steven L. Kaplan, (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to Nineteenth Century*, (Berlin, 1984); Barry Reay, (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England*, *passim*, especially pp. 129–130.
- 82 James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, (London, 1883): 259.
- 83 Rohini Kumar Sen, *Bakla*, 37; Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangaleer Itihas: Adi Parba*, (A history of the Bengalees: the early phase), (Third edition, Calcutta, 1386 BS): 296.
- 84 'Swadareshu ratischaiba, paradara bisarjanam.'
[Sex only with your own wife, other peoples' wives should be kept at a distance.] Kaliprasanna Biswas, *Jatibibaran*, (A description of castes), (Rangpur 1319 BS): 29.
Also see, *Brahmavaivarttapuranam*, translated into Bengali in verse by Gayaram Batabyal, (Calcutta, 1881): 475.
- 85 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, 24; Nityananda Haldar, *Srihari Darshan*, 100.
- 86 'Nari karo pati sar, pati chhada chhusne ar, . . .
Paranari matrisama, nare mano e niyam. . .
[Women, consider your husbands to be everything in your lives. Do not any more touch other persons except your husbands . . . Men, remember the dictum that all women other than your wives are like your mother . . .]
Matua Sangeet, 138.
The song clearly indicates the earlier slackness in man–woman relationship and the subsequent transition to disciplined sexual behaviour.
- 87 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Mahasamkirtan*, 50, 74.
- 88 H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I: 188.
- 89 Gyan Prakash, 'Becoming a Bhuinya: Oral Traditions and Contested Domination in Eastern India', in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, (eds.), *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, (Delhi, 1991): 147–160.
- 90 Andre Beteille, *Society and Politics: Essays in a Comparative Perspective*, (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1991): 44.
- 91 M. N. Srinivas, 'Varna and Caste', reprinted in Dipankar Gupta, (ed.), *Social Stratification*, (Delhi, 1992): 33.
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- 135 Revd. P. Noble, Baptist Mission, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 15 October 1917, GB, Political (Political), File No. 8A-10, B November 1917, Progs. No. 65, WBSA; Sitanath Biswas, *Jatitattwa O Namasya Kulodarpan*, 157, 160.
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- 139 'Swargadapi gareewasi janmabhumi janani, jnaneera kay, Swajati sabar param garishtha, Swajati tulya ki hay'.
Raicharan Biswas, *Jatiya Jagaran*, 124; also see pp. 1, 17, 48-49.
The title of the book is also significant. It does not mean 'national awakening', which can be one way of translating the two words. It means 'the awakening of a caste', which is also a correct translation with the word *jati* meaning caste rather than nation.
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- 80 Meghnad Saha, 'Jatiya Unnatir Upay', (The ways of national progress), *Nabyabharat*, Vol. 40, No. 8, Agrhayan 1329 BS: 377.
- 81 Bepin Chandra Pal, 'Anadhinata na Swadhinata', (End of dependence or independence), *Nabyabharat*, Vol. 39, No. 5, Bhadra 1328 BS: 279.

- 82 J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, (California, 1968): 159–160.
- 83 GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 6R-2, April 1920, Progs. Nos. 3–10, Notes: 13–14; also Appendix B, WBSA.
- 84 'Notes on the Communal Award . . . by Rai Sahib P Barma; Note by Sarat Chandra Bal submitted to R. N. Reid, Member, Executive Council, Bengal, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1 R-90, 8 August 1933, Progs. Nos. 870–886, WBSA; Mahananda Halder, *Sri Sri Guruchand-Charit*, (A biography of Guruchand), (Calcutta, 1943): 284–285; *Report of the Bengal Franchise Committee*, (Calcutta, 1932): 23.
- 85 FR for the Second half of December 1920, GI, Home (Political), Deposit, February 1921, No. 77, NAI.
- 86 Advocate General, Madras, to GI, 29 September 1921, GI, Home (Political), File No. 330 (1–48) of 1921, NAI.
- 87 'History of the Non-cooperation Movement in Bengal', GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 395 of 1924, WBSA.; also for details of the movement in Bengal, see Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*, 225–310; J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, 204–243.
- 88 'History of the Non-cooperation Movement in Bengal', 11, 15.
- 89 Raicharan Biswas, *Jatiya Jagaran*, 1, 17, 48–49, 124.
- 90 Mahananda Halder, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 174, 413–415, 443.
- 91 *BLCP*, Vol. I, No. 4, 2 March 1921: 158–160.
- 92 *Ibid*: Vol. 4, 29 August 1921: 113–115, 121.
- 93 'History of the Non-cooperation Movement in Bengal', 10.
- 94 P.H. Waddel, District Magistrate, Bakarganj, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 26 December 1921, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 39 (129–137) of 1921, WBSA.
- 95 For more details on the indifference of the lower classes, see Sumit Sarkar, 'Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, 1905–1922, in Ranajit Guha, (ed), *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Delhi, 1984).
- 96 *BLCP*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 20 February 1922: 9.
- 97 S. Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India*, (Bombay, 1959): 145.
- 98 Upendranath Bandyopadhyay, 'Congresser Karjyapranali', (The activities of the Congress), *Bangabani*, Vol. I (2nd half), No. 3, Kartik 1329 BS: 282.
- 99 Reprinted in Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Janasangha*, 16, 24–26; translation author's.
- 100 *Ibid*: i–ix, 55–64.
- 101 Rajani Kanta Das, *Bangiya Namasudra Conference*, (The Namasudra conference of Bengal), [Presidential Address], (Bengal Namasudra Conference Committee, Pirojpur, 1922): 4–7.
- 102 *Ibid*: 9–11, 20–23.
- 103 *Ibid*: 17–18, 23.
- 104 Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*, 306–307.
- 105 Mahananda Halder, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 442–443.
- 106 *BLCP*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 4 July 1921: 91; Vol. 11, No. 1, 30 January 1923: 362; Vol. 13, 15 August 1923: 56–57.
- 107 *Ibid*: Vol. 9, 23 August 1922: 72–73.
- 108 *Ibid*: Vol. 10, 28 November 1922: 393.

- 109 *Ibid.*: Vol. 1, No. 6, 1 April 1921: 79.
- 110 *Ibid.*: Vol. 1, No. 3, 21 February 1921: 25.
- 111 *Ibid.*: Vol. 3, 18 July 1921: 697.
- 112 *Ibid.*: Vol. 7, No. 2, 20 February 1922: 8.
- 113 *Ibid.*: Vol. 3, 6 July 1921: 237.
- 114 GB Education (Education), File No. 110-198, November 1922, Progs. Nos. 96-97, Notes, WBSA.
- 115 For example, he urged the government to take immediate steps to prevent repeated failures of crops in the *bil* areas of pargana Talihati in Muksudpur, Gopalganj and Kasiani in the district of Faridpur. This had been caused, as he alleged, by the early flooding of the low agricultural lands as a consequence of the raising of the embankment on the Madaripur *bil* route. *BLCP*, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1 April 1921: 79; Vol. 3, 4 July 1921: 72; Vol. 7, No. 3, 27 February 1922: 3.
- 116 *Ibid.*: Vol. 3, 7 July 1921: 306-308.
- 117 *Ibid.*: Vol. 3, 4 July 1921: 181-182.
- 118 *Ibid.*: Vol. 3, 12 July 1921: 495-496.
- 119 *Ibid.*: Vol. 7, No. 3, 27 February 1922: 27-28.
- 120 J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, 237.
- 121 Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, *Desbandhu-Smriti*, (Memories of Deshbandhu), (Calcutta, 1939): 43, 70.
- 122 *Ibid.*: 70.
- 123 *BLCP*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 24 January 1924: 39-40; *Report of the Bengal Franchise Committee*, 24.
- 124 *Ibid.*
- 125 *Ibid.*
- 126 FR for the second half of May 1923, WBSA.
- 127 G. P. Hogg, District Magistrate, Faridpur, to A. N. Moberly, Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 15 May 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 128 SDO, Gopalganj, to District Magistrate, Faridpur, 15 October 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 129 FR for the first half of July 1923, WBSA.
- 130 G.P. Hogg, District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 21 May 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 131 *Ibid.*
- 132 *Ibid.*
- 133 Copy of telegram from District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 17 May 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 134 G.P. Hogg, District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 21 May 1923, *op.cit.*
- 135 Special Report Case No. 41 of 1923 - Report II, 28 May 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 136 G.P. Hogg, District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 22 May 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 137 G. P. Hogg, District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 21 May 1923, *op. cit.*; FR for the second half of May 1923, WBSA.

- 138 A. R. Bose, Offcg. District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 19 September 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 139 SDO, Gopalganj, to District Magistrate, Faridpur, 12 September 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 140 SDO, Gopalganj, to District Magistrate, Faridpur, 15 October 1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 141 Mahananda Halder, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 444-450.
- 142 A. R. Bose, Offcg. District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 19 September 1923, *op. cit.*; SDO, Gopalganj, to District Magistrate Faridpur, 15 October 1923, *op. cit.*
- 143 Ashutosh Das Gupta, Sub-Inspector, Muksudpur PS., to SDO, Gopalganj, 22.9.1923, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149; FR for the first half of November 1923, WBSA.
- 144 Faridpur Special Report Case No. 41/23-10th Report, 18 March 1924; 11th Report, 25 March 1924, and 12th Report, 12 April 1924, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149; also, B.N. Banerjee, SP, Faridpur, to Assistant Inspector General of Police, Bengal, 23 July 1925, GB, Police, File No. P5R-2(4-12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. Nos. 93-103, WBSA.
- 145 Petition to the Governor, from the Namasudra and Musalman subjects of Orakandi, 2 May 1924, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 146 Telegram from Abdul Kader, Secy., Anjuman, Gopalganj, to Chief Secy., GB, 9 May 1924, GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, WBSA.
- 147 GB, Police, File No. P5R-11/23, B May 1924, Progs. Nos. 110-149, Notes: 17-18, WBSA.
- 148 'Special Report Case No. 19/25, Report II', 20 May 1925, GB, Police, File No. P5R-2(4-12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. No. 95-103, WBSA.
- 149 Memo No. 4074 from Deputy Inspector General of Police, Bakarganj Range, 26 August 1925, GB, Police, File No. P5R-2(4-12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. Nos. 95-103, WBSA.
- 150 L.B. Burrows, District Magistrate, Faridpur, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 8 August 1925, GB, Police, File No. P5R-2(4-12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. Nos. 95-103, WBSA.
- 151 A. H. Clayton, Commissioner, Dacca Divn., to L. Birley, Chief Secy., GB, Memo No. 608S, GB, Police, File No. P5R-2(4-12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. Nos. 95-103, WBSA.
- 152 SP, Faridpur, to Deputy Inspector General of Police, Bakarganj Range, 6 October 1925, GB, Police, File No. P5R-2(4-12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. Nos. 95-103, WBSA.
- 153 Note by L. Birley [Chief Secy.], 9.10.25, GB, Police, File No. P5R-2(4-12)/25, B March 1926, Progs. Nos. 95-103, Notes: 15, WBSA.
- 154 Asok Majumdar, *Peasant Protest in Indian Politics: Tebhaga Movement in Bengal*, (New Delhi, 1993): 63.
- 155 FR for the first half of March 1925, WBSA.
- 156 Quoted in J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, 273.

5 CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS AND A FISSURED COMMUNITY, 1925-1937

- 1 For details see, Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question*, (Calcutta, 1984): 66-80; Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947*, (Delhi, 1991): Chapters 3-4.
- 2 Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, *Swadhinatar Bani*, (The message of independence), (Sirajganj, nd [1924?]): 6-7.
- 3 Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, *Nipirita Sudrer Nidrabhanga*, (The awakening of the suppressed Sudras), (Calcutta, nd [1927?]): 1-4, 125-129, Appendix A.
- 4 Prafulla Chandra Ray, *Sabhapatir Abhibhashan*, *Faridpur Pradeshik Hindu Sabha*, (Presidential Address, Faridpur Provincial Hindu Conference), (Calcutta, 1925): 1-3, 6-7.
- 5 For a more elaborate discussion on the ideological aspects of this Hindu solidarity project in the 1920s, see Pradip Kumar Datta, "Dying Hindus": Production of Hindu Communal Common Sense in Early 20th Century Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 June 1993: 1305-1319.
- 6 'Sanskarakar Siksha', (The lessons for the reformer), *Bangabani*, Vol. 3, First half, No. 4, Jaistha 1331 BS: 528; Kalinganath Ghosh, 'Mahatma Gandhi O Bartaman Hindu Samaj', (Mahatma Gandhi and the present Hindu society), *Bangabani*, Vol. 4, First half, No. 3, Baisakh 1332 BS: 319; Jogeschandra Pal, 'Dhvangser Mukhe Bangalar Hindu', (The Hindus of Bengal facing destruction), *Bangabani*, Vol. 6, First half, No. 1, Falgun 1333 BS: 34; 'Jatiyatver Chetana', (The consciousness of nationalism), *Bangabani*, Vol. 6, Second half, No. 4, Agrhayan 1334 BS: 477; also see, Dvijadas Datta, *Vaidik Varna ba Jatitattwa*, (Theory of Vedic varna or caste), (Comilla, nd): 38.
- 7 For details on Hindu Mahasabha activities during this period, see Papia Chakravarty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment: Bengal 1909-1935*, (Calcutta, 1992): 274-282.
- 8 A. N. Moberley, Chief Secy., GB, to H. G. Haig, Secy, GI, Home dept., 4 November 1926, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 516 of 1926, WBSA.
- 9 Manindranath Mandal, *Bange Digindranarayan*, (Digindranarayan in Bengal), (Calcutta, 1333 BS): 17.
- 10 Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Janasangha*, (Bengal Peoples' Association), (Khejuri, Midnapur, 1330 BS): 54.
- 11 *Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1924-25*, (Calcutta, 1926): xiii.
- 12 *BLCP*, Vol. 18, 13 August 1925: 42; Vol. 19, 10 December 1925: 356.
- 13 *Ibid*, Vol. 19, 10 December 1925: 350-351, 358.
- 14 *Bengalee*, 28 January 1926.
- 15 *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 29 April 1927.
- 16 For details see, Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947*, 81-93. In Chatterjee's analysis the two depressed classes representatives are only referred to as 'one or two isolated Hindu members', supporting the 'Muhammadan bloc' against the 'Swarajya bloc' and the 'European bloc' (p. 88). The identification of the two depressed classes representatives makes the alignment more clear.
- 17 Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in India: Mid-Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Calcutta, 1982): 52.
- 18 Papia Chakravarty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment*, 286.
- 19 GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 5M-114, November 1928, Progs Nos. 15-16, Notes: 2, WBSA.

- 20 BLCP, Vol. 34, No. 3, 19 March 1930: 158.
- 21 GB, Education (Education), File No. 2P-57 of 1925, B July 1926, Progs Nos. 715-719, Abstract, WBSA.
- 22 GB, Education (Education), File No. Edn.2P-88, B December 1925, Progs Nos. 1362-1364, Abstract, WBSA.
- 23 GB, Education (Education), File No. 10C-8, B July 1926, Progs. Nos. 256-257, Abstract; File No. 3P-11, B July 1926, Progs Nos. 263-264, Abstract, WBSA.
- 24 Kamalakanta Das, Secy., Namasudra Association, Orakandi, to Minister in charge of Education, Bengal, 15 March 1927, GB, Education (Education), File No. 2P-35, B June 1927, Progs Nos. 895-896, WBSA.
- 25 GB, Education (Education) Dept., to Secy, Namasudra Association, Orakandi, 5 May 1927, GB, Education (Education), File No. 2P-35, B June 1927, Progs Nos. 895-896, WBSA.
- 26 GB, Education (Education), File No. 1E-4(II), B December 1926, Progs Nos. 381-384, Abstract, WBSA.
- 27 GB, Education (Education), File No. 1H-36, B September 1927, Progs Nos. 61-62; also Notes: 1, WBSA.
- 28 GB, Education (Education), File No. 10-3, B August 1928, Progs Nos. 277-278, Abstract; File No. 1H-2, B May 1930, Progs Nos. 364-366, Abstract; File No. 1H-41, B May 1930, Progs Nos. 639-644, Abstract, WBSA.
- 29 GB, Education (Education), File No. 1G-59, B June 1929, Progs Nos. 318-319, Abstract, WBSA.
- 30 DPI to Secy, GB, Education dept., 27 October 1930, GB, Education (Education), File No. 7S-3, April 1932, Progs Nos. 34-36, WBSA. Italics added.
- 31 Secy., GB, Education, to DPI, 27 April 1932, GB, Education (Education), File No. 7S-3, April 1932, Progs Nos. 34-36, WBSA. Emphasis added.
- 32 BLCP, Vol. 19, 10 December 1925: 352-353.
- 33 Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, (The substance of Matua religious theories), (Thakurnagar, 1393 BS): 142-143.
- 34 'Minutes on the Depressed Classes by Mr M. B. Mullick', *Report of the Bengal Franchise Committee*, (Calcutta, 1932): 23-24. Sarat Chandra Bal was the son of Dr Tarini Charan Bala, who was in the first Namasudra delegation to Lancelot Hare in 1907 (see Chapter 3).
- 35 GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 1R-54, April 1932, Progs Nos. 42-83, Notes: 30, WBSA.
- 36 GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-133 of 1932, July 1933, Progs Nos. 20-21, Notes: 3 and Appendix I and II, WBSA.
- 37 DM, Faridpur to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 31 December 1928, GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 5M-114 of 1928, February 1930, Progs Nos. 7-20, WBSA.
- 38 District Officer, Bakarganj, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 3 January 1929, in *ibid*.
- 39 Magistrate, Jessore to Commissioner, Presidency Divn., 2 January 1929, in *ibid*.
- 40 DM, Khulna to Commissioner, Presidency Divn., 2 January 1929, in *ibid*.
- 41 Collector of Dacca to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 22 December 1928, in *ibid*.
- 42 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand-charit*, (A biography of Guruchand), (in Bengali), (Calcutta, 1943): 130, 530.

- 43 GB, Appointment, File No. 15A-2, B September 1929, Progs. No. 81, Abstract, WBSA; GI, Reforms Office, File No. 163/III/30-R, NAI; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, (Namasudra community and Bengal), (Calcutta, 1368 BS): 39, 52-55; Sitanath Biswas, *Jatitattva O Namasyakulodarpan*, (A theory of caste and the history of Namasudra lineage), (Dacca, 1931): 160.
- 44 The Bengal depressed classes' deputation that was examined by the Indian Statutory Commission on 21 January 1929 comprised of ten members, out of which six were Namasudras. Indian Statutory Commission: Oral Evidence – Bengal, Vol. II.
- 45 Indian Statutory Commission: Written Evidence, Bengal, Vol. I, E-Ben-421.
- 46 Written Statement submitted by the Bengal Depressed Classes Association, Indian Statutory Commission, Written Evidence, Bengal, Vol. I, E-Ben-421.
- 47 Written Statement submitted on behalf of the All Bengal Namasudra Association, Indian Statutory Commission, Written Evidence, Bengal, Vol. I, E-Ben-58.
- 48 This attitude was most evident among the Muslims in the same period. See Farzana Shaikh, 'Muslims and Political Representation in colonial India: The Making of Pakistan', in Mushirul Hasan, (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization*, (Delhi, 1993): 84-85.
- 49 All Bengal Namasudra Association, Memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission, 28 March 1928, Indian Statutory Commission, Written Evidence, Bengal, Vol. I, E-Ben-58.
- 50 Written Statement submitted on behalf of the All Bengal Namasudra Association, *op. cit.*
- 51 Indian Statutory Commission, Oral Evidence – Bengal, Vol. II.
- 52 Written Statement submitted on behalf of the All Bengal Namasudra Association, *op. cit.*
- 53 All Bengal Namasudra Association, Memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission, *op. cit.*
- 54 *Banglar Katha*, 12 December, 16 December 1928, 6 April 1929; *Liberty*, 3 July, 9 November 1929.
- 55 *Report on the Administration of Bengal*, 1927-28, (Calcutta, 1929): 8.
- 56 Commissioner, Presidency Divn., to Chief Secy., GB, 9 January 1929; Magistrate, Jessore, to Commissioner, Presidency Divn., 2 January 1929; DM, Khulna, to Commissioner, Presidency Divn., 2 January 1929; GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 5M-114 of 1928, February 1930, Progs Nos. 7-20, WBSA. For more details on the sharecroppers' movement, see, Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest*, (Delhi, 1987): 40-41.
- 57 An account of this *satyagraha*, based exclusively on newspaper reports, may be found in Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, *Satyagrahas in Bengal*, 1921-39, (Calcutta, 1977): 159-184. But the story needs to be recounted here again, for, archival sources, which Bhattacharya did not see, add interesting new dimensions to it. Moreover, Bhattacharya misses many of the nuances of the story, as he does not situate it within the overall context of the Namasudra movement. Our recounting of the story will, however, frequently draw factual details from his account.
- 58 Madanmohan Bhaumik, *Muktir Pathe*, (On the way to liberation), (Calcutta, 1331 BS): 6.

- 59 Jagadishchandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, (Jogendranath, the noble soul), Part I, (Calcutta, 1382 BS): 16.
- 60 Kalidas Ray, '*Jatyabhiman*', (The pride of caste), *Bangabani*, Vol. V, 1st half, No. 5, Ashadh 1333 BS: 494.
- 61 Circular letter No. 15 from President, BPCC, 17 March 1929, AICC Papers, File No. P-6, Part II, 1927, NMML.
- 62 See for examples, Sailesnath Sarma Bishi, *Hindu Samajer Bartaman Abastha*, (Present condition of the Hindu society), [Speech of the Chairman of the Reception Committee, Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference, Serajganj], (Calcutta, nd [1923?]): 11-12; Matilal Ray, *Hindur Jagaran*, (Awakening of the Hindus), (Calcutta, 1333 BS): 3-7. Indeed throughout the period extending from 1923 to 1929, there was a concerted and organised Hindu campaign to reinforce Hindu solidarity by creating a public opinion in favour of removal of untouchability and temple entry. See for details, Papia Chakravarty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment: Bengal 1909-1935*, 276-285.
- 63 Note submitted by H. C. Rae to H. H. Risley, 4 August 1886; Aswini Kumar Basu to H. H. Risley, 3 December 1886, 'Ethnographic Papers: Social Status of Castes', Mss. Eur. E. 101, Vol. VI: 103, 125; IOL.
- 64 Himangsu Mohan Chattopadhyay, *Bikrampur*, Vol. II, (Narayanganj, Dacca, 1859 Saka): 49.
- 65 Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, *Satyagrahas in Bengal*, 160-161.
- 66 *Banglar Katha*, 12 December 1928.
- 67 Papia Chakravarty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment*, 283.
- 68 O. M. Martin, DM, Dacca, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 27 September 1929, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 610(1-5) of 1929, WBSA; *Liberty*, 18 October 1929.
- 69 Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, *Satyagrahas in Bengal*, 162.
- 70 O. M. Martin, DM, Dacca, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 27 September 1929; also Newspaper Cutting-1, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 610(1-5) of 1929, WBSA.
- 71 See, Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, nationalism and communism in south India: Malabar 1900-1948*, (Cambridge, 1994): 80-83.
- 72 For Gandhi's views on untouchability and temple entry, see Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*, (New Delhi, Newbury Park, London, 1989): 207-246.
- 73 Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, *Satyagrahas in Bengal*, 162-163.
- 74 Eleanor Zelliot, 'Congress and the Untouchables, 1917-1950', in Richard Sisson and S. Wolpert, (eds.), *Congress and Indian Nationalism: The Pre-Independence Phase*, (Delhi, 1988): 187-188.
- 75 O. M. Martin, DM, Dacca, to Chief Secy., GB, 4 November 1929, *op. cit.*; *Liberty*, 18 October 1929.
- 76 W. D. R. Prentice, Chief Secy, GB, to DM, Dacca, 30 October 1929; also Notes: 2, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 610(1-5) of 1929, WBSA.
- 77 O. M. Martin, DM, Dacca, to Chief Secy., GB, 4 November 1929; also Newspaper cutting-1, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 610(1-5) of 1929, WBSA.
- 78 Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, *Satyagrahas in Bengal*, 165, 167-68.
- 79 For more details, see *ibid*: 165-173.
- 80 *Ibid*: 167, 176, 178-79.

- 81 *Liberty*, 10 December 1929.
- 82 *Liberty*, 31 December 1929.
- 83 *Liberty*, 3 January 1930.
- 84 *Liberty*, 15 December 1929, 1 January, 25 April 1930.
- 85 *Matua Mahasangher Lakshya O Karmasuchi*, (The aims and programmes of the Matua Mahasangha), (Second edition, Thakurnagar, 1394 BS): 9–10.
- 86 *Liberty*, 27 December 1930
- 87 Secy., BPCC to Secy., AICC, 29 April 1930, AICC Papers, File No. P-6, Pt.II, 1927, NMML.
- 88 An excellent discussion of this protest politics in Bengal during the Civil Disobedience days may be seen in Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928–1934: The Politics of Protest*.
- 89 DM, Bakarganj, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 19 May 1930, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 599 of 1930; FR for the second half of June 1930, WBSA.
- 90 Extract from Report by the Intelligence Branch, CID, Bengal, on the Political Situation and Labour Unrest for the week ending 9 July 1930; also, DM, Bakarganj, to Under Secy., GB, Political Dept., 31 July 1930, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 597(1–3) of 1930; DM, Bakarganj, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 6 May 1931, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 345(1–3) of 1931, WBSA; also see Sitanath Biswas, *Jatitattva O Namasyakulodarpan*, 117–118.
- 91 *Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1931–32*, (Calcutta, 1933): 21.
- 92 GI, Reforms Office, File No. 163/III/30–R, NAI.
- 93 GI, Reforms, File No. 163/III/30–R, NAI.
- 94 FR for the second half of August 1930, WBSA.
- 95 GI, Reforms Office, File No. K.W. of 35/31–R, NAI.
- 96 *Liberty*, 8 October, 10 November 1931
- 97 *Liberty*, 17 February, 24 February 1932.
- 98 S. K. Gupta, *The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics: Their Emergence as a Political Power*, (New Delhi, 1985): 280.
- 99 *The Hindustan Times*, 29 February 1932; *Leader* (Allahabad), 11 May 1932; GI, Reforms Office, File No. 111/32–R, NAI.
- 100 'Minute on the Depressed Classes by M. B. Mullick', *Report of the Bengal Franchise Committee*, 21–23. Italics added.
- 101 *Liberty*, 22 February 1932. Italics added.
- 102 Amulyadhan Ray, Secy., All Bengal Depressed Classes Federation, to Private Secy. to the Governor of Bengal, 11 September 1932, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos. 870–886, WBSA.
- 103 *Liberty*, 18 and 22 September 1932.
- 104 A Hindu meeting at the instance of Faridpur Bar Association on 17.9.32, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos. 870–886, WBSA.
- 105 Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, (A biography of Guruchand), (in Bengali), (Calcutta, 1943): 544.
- 106 Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association to GI, 22 September 1932, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 199/R/1932, NAI.
- 107 S. Mandal, President, Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association, to

- His Majesty King & Emperor of India, 24 September 1932, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-90, B August 1933, Progs.Nos. 870-886, WBSA.
- 108 Madhusudan Sarkar, Secy., Depressed Classes Association, Pabna, to Chief Secy., GB, 22 September 1932, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-90, B August 1933, Progs Nos. 870-886, WBSA.
- 109 According to this procedure, all the the depressed classes voters registered in a constituency would form an electoral college and would elect for each of such reserved seats a panel of four candidates belonging to the depressed classes. These four persons, thus elected through a 'primary election', would then be the candidates for election by the general electorate. For more details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, (Calcutta, 1990): 75-76.
- 110 R. C. Ray, Jt. Secy., Bengal Depressed Classes Association, to Reforms Officer, GB, 27 September 1932, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos. 870-886, WBSA.
- 111 BLCP, Vol. 46, No. 2, 14 August 1935: 44-45.
- 112 Surendra Chandra Mazumdar, Secy., Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association, to Governor General and Viceroy of India, 25 September 1932, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 199/R/1932, NAI.
- 113 'Statement of the Bengal Depressed Classes Federation on the Poona Settlement', by Amulyadhan Ray, Secy., 27 September 1932, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 199/R/1932, NAI.
- 114 Rasiklal Biswas, Secy., All India Depressed Classes Federation, to Reforms Officer, GB, 19 December 1932, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-2 of 1933, April 1934, Progs. Nos. 9-61, WBSA.
- 115 R. C. Roy, Secy., Bengal Depressed Classes Association, to GI, 27 September 1932, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 199/R/1932, NAI.
- 116 R. C. Roy, Jt. Secy., Bengal Depressed Classes Association, to the Viceroy of India, 19 October 1932, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 199/R/1932, NAI.
- 117 BLCP, Vol. 41, No. 2, 14 March 1933: 99.
- 118 For a more detailed discussion on this orthodox Hindu opposition to Poona Pact, see, Papia Chakravarty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment*, 319-34.
- 119 BLCP, Vol. 41, No. 2, 14 March 1933: 92-121; Vol. 41, No. 3, 3 April 1933: 248.
- 120 *Harijan*, 29 April 1933.
- 121 *Forward*, 11 November 1933.
- 122 *Liberty*, 10 August 1933.
- 123 *Liberty*, 6 August 1933.
- 124 *Liberty*, 20 July 1933.
- 125 BLCP, Vol. 34, No. 3, 25 March 1930: 432-33.
- 126 *Ibid*: 18 March 1930, 80.
- 127 *Ibid*: 19 March 1930, 158.
- 128 GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 1-D-146, September 1930, Progs. Nos. 12-17, Notes: 3 and Appendix A, WBSA.
- 129 GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 4-D-10 of 1930, June 1931, Progs. Nos. 36-41, Appendix A & B, WBSA.
- 130 Commissioner, Dacca Divn., to Chief Secy, GB, 22 November 1930; Collector, Bakarganj, to Commissioner, Dacca Divn., 11 September 1930,

- GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 4-D-10 of 1930, June 1931, Progs. Nos. 36-41, also Notes: 3, WBSA.
- 131 'Statements' in GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 8L-35 of 1932, B April 1933, Progs. Nos. 429-430; *BLCP*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 28 March 1933: 634-35.
- 132 'Notes of a discussion with a deputation of the Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association (that waited on His Excellency) on board the "Sonamukhi" at Faridpur on the 24th July 1933', GB, Appointment, File No. 8L-95, B September 1933, Progs. No. 271; also Notes: 3, WBSA. The members of the delegation were P. R. Thakur, Sarat Chandra Bal, Jogesh Chandra Sarkar, Manoranjan Das, Shyama Charan Biswas and Kishori Mohan Sarkar.
- 133 'His Excellency's Reply to the Addresses presented at Faridpur on 24 July 1933', GB, Appointment, File No. 8L-95, B September 1933, Prog. No. 271, WBSA.
- 134 GB, Appointment, File No. 8L-2, B September 1934, Prog. No. 166, Abstract, WBSA.
- 135 GB, Appointment, File No. 8L-54, B December 1934, Prog. No. 531, Abstract, WBSA.
- 136 GB, Appointment, File No. 4D-10, B October 1934, Progs. Nos. 209-210, Abstract, WBSA.
- 137 GB, Appointment, File No. 4D-7, B April 1935, Prog. No. 743, Abstract, WBSA.
- 138 G. P. Hogg, Chief Secy., GB, to all Commissioners of Divns., 25 June 1935; Memorandum No. 9898A, GB, Appointment (Appointment) Dept., 21 September 1936, GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 4-D-3 of 1934, November 1936, Progs. Nos. 31-44, WBSA.
- 139 Resolution by the Government of Bengal, Appointment (Reforms) Dept., No. 122 A.R., 16 January 1933, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-2 of 1933, April 1934, Progs. Nos. 9-61, WBSA.
- 140 Secy., Indian Association, to Reforms Officer, GB, 15 February 1933; Secy., Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, to Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, 17 January 1933; Secy., All Bengal Depressed Classes Federation, to Reforms Officer, GB, 18 February 1933; GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-2 of 1933, April 1934, Progs. Nos. 9-61, WBSA.
- 141 'A brief statement on the subject of delimitation of constituencies and distribution of seats reserved for the depressed classes of Bengal', by Amulyadhan Ray, MLC, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-30, April 1934, Progs. Nos. 103-111, WBSA.
- 142 'Note by Rai Sahib Sarat Chandra Bal, M.L.C., on the subject of delimitation of constituencies and distribution of seats', GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-30, April 1934, Progs. Nos. 103-111, WBSA.
- 143 Sarat Chandra Bal to R. N. Reid, Member of the Executive Council, Bengal, not dated, GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos. 870-886, WBSA.
- 144 The allotment of seats in the Namasudra areas was like this: Bakarganj - 1, Faridpur - 2, Mymensingh - 2, Dacca - 2, Khulna - 2, Jessore - 1; see Statement V, Appointment (Reforms) Dept., GB, Appointment (Reforms), File No. 1R-30, April 1934, Progs. Nos. 103-111, WBSA.

- 145 *BLCP*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 14 August 1935: 45.
- 146 *Ibid*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 15 August 1935: 99–101, 111–112.
- 147 GB, Appointment, File No. 1R-91 of 1934, B January 1935, Prog. No. 490, Abstract; File No. 1R-166, B September 1935, Progs. Nos. 100–102, Abstract, WBSA.
- 148 To the Marquess of Zetland, Secretary of State for India, The humble memorial of the undersigned representatives of the Hindus of Bengal, including the Hindu Members of the Bengal Legislative Council, GB, Home (Constitution and Elections), File No. R. 3C-1, B June 1937, Progs. Nos. 110–119, WBSA.
- 149 'Memoirs of P. D. Martyn', Mss. Eur. F. 180/13: 14, IOL.
- 150 Md. Enamul Huq Khan, 'A. K. Fazlul Huq and Muslim League in Bengal 1906–1947', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1982, Chapter IV.
- 151 GB, Home (Constitution and Elections), File No. R. 3E-32, June 1937, Progs. Nos. 2–25, WBSA.
- 152 'Statement II: Detailed Statement Showing the results of election to the Bengal Legislative Assembly, 1937'; 'Statement showing the strength of various parties in the Bengal Legislative Assembly', GB, Home (Constitution and Elections), File No. R.3E-27, May 1937, Progs. Nos. 1–13; Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of January 1937, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 10/37, WBSA; Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 550–551.
- 153 *Star of India*, 1 April 1937, GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 10/37, WBSA.
- 154 *BLCP*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 31 March 1930: 632.
- 155 *Ibid*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 20 February 1933: 4.
- 156 These meetings included the fourth annual Depressed Classes Conference, the West Bengal Namasudra Conference, all Bengal Namasudra Conference at Brahmanbaria, Mymensingh District Namasudra Conference at Tangail, a general meeting of the Bengal Depressed Classes Association and a Depressed Classes Conference at Calcutta, the annual general meeting of the All Bengal Namasudra Association at Dacca, an annual general meeting of the Dacca District Namasudra Association, the fifth Provincial Namasudra Conference at Barisal, a meeting of the All Bengal Namasudra League at Calcutta, a general meeting of the Calcutta Namasudra Association and a general 'Backward and Depressed' Classes' conference at Calcutta. For details see, *Liberty*, 24 April, 25 April, 19 December 1930, 16 December, 21 December 1932, 23 January, 5 February, 9 February, 14 April, 20 May, 29 May, 4 September 1933; *Forward*, 4 November 1933; for details of meetings during 1931–32, see Section III of this chapter.
- 157 Tour Diary of the Sub-Divisional Officer, Tangail, 1933, Carritt Papers, Mss. Eur. D. 1172: 23, IOL.
- 158 *Liberty*, 21 May, 24 May 1933; *Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1931–32*, xxiv–xxv.
- 159 Some of the local leaders involved in the anti-untouchability campaign had a clear communal agenda in their minds. The President of the Faridpur District Untouchability Removal Committee, for example, made no secret of his notions of unity: 'It was only with the help of the lower castes that the

- Hindus could survive in their conflict with the Muslims' – a notion that had been popularised in Bengal since the mid-1920s. See Srīmat Swami Samadhi Prakash Aranya (Nareshchandra Chattopadhyay), *Jatikatha*, (An account of Castes), (Faridpur, 1340 BS): 17
- 160 *Harijan*, 18 February, 4 March, 11 March, 18 March, 25 March, 1 April, 8 April, 29 April, 13 May, 27 May, 3 June, 10 June, 17 June, 8 July, 15 July, 9 September, 14 October, 24 November 1933, 20 July 1934, 4 January, 18 January 1935.
- 161 *Ibid*: 21 October, 24 November 1933, 4 January, 18 January 1935
- 162 'Conference of the Commissioners. Draft of Memorandum on the General Political and Economic Situation in Bengal', GB, Home (Confidential), File No. 689/33, WBSA.
- 163 For more details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, 171–72.
- 164 *Harijan*, 15 July 1933.
- 165 *Report on the Administration of Bengal 1932–33*, (Calcutta, 1934): xvi.
- 166 Priyanath Sankhyatirtha, *Gandhiji O Hindusamaj*, (Gandhiji and Hindu society), (Sibpur, Howrah, 1933): 2, 20.
- 167 *Liberty*, 2 June 1933.
- 168 *Forward*, 29 November 1933.
- 169 *Report on the Administration of Bengal 1933–34*, (Calcutta, 1935): iv–v, x.
- 170 *Forward*, 6 November, 24 November 1933.
- 171 *Harijan*, 7 September 1934.
- 172 Papiā Chakravarty, *Hindu Response To Nationalist Ferment: Bengal 1909–1935*, 265–66.
- 173 For details see Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1828–1934*, 69–75; Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in India: Mid-Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 53.
- 174 For details on the Krishak Praja Party, see Md. Enamul Huq Khan, 'A. K. Fazlul Huq and Muslim League in Bengal 1906–1947', Chapter III, especially pp. 54–56, 64–69; Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920–1947: The Land Question*, 139–41, 166–70; Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in India*, 53–54; Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, social structure and Politics, 1919–1947*, (Cambridge, 1986): 186–206.
- 175 Sureshchandra Gupta, Aswini Kumar, (Barisal, 1335 BS): 557, 559.
- 176 I owe this information to Professor Tapan Raychaudhuri, as this candidate happened to be his uncle. He mentioned it to me while responding to my paper at a History department seminar in Calcutta University in 1990.

6 FROM ALIENATION TO INTEGRATION, 1937–1947: THE LEADERS

- 1 For details see, Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937–1947*, (New Delhi, 1976): 93–100.
- 2 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, 'The general Elections (1945–46), The Legislative Assembly – Bengal', May 23, 1946, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 106/3/45–R, NAI.
- 3 We may mention in this regard the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act of 1938, followed by the appointment of a Land Revenue Commission, the launching of a comprehensive rural reconstruction scheme in 1939, the Bengal

- Moneylenders' Act and the Secondary Education Bill of 1940. For details, see Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-47*, 93-100.
- 4 Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947*, (Delhi, 1991): 32-33.
 - 5 BLAP, Vol. 51, No. 4, 11 September 1937: 1343-1345; 27 September 1937: 2039; 29 September 1937: 2202; Vol. 54, No. 3, 8 March 1939: 38; Vol. 54, No. 8, 18 May 1939: 66-67; Vol. 56, No. 4, 14 March 1940: 119; Vol. 57, No. 3, 2 August 1940: 102-103.
 - 6 *Ibid*: Vol. 51, No. 4, 30 September 1937: 2271.
 - 7 *Ibid*: Vol. 54, No. 8, 17 May 1939: 31.
 - 8 *Ibid*: Vol. 52, No. 5, 25 March 1938: 371; Vol. 54, No. 2, 7 March 1939: 200-204; Vol. 54, No. 4, 23 March 1939: 163-164.
 - 9 *Ibid*: Vol. 51, No. 4, 30 September 1937: 2239
 - 10 *Ibid*: Vol. 52, No. 2, 24 February 1938: 207-208; Vol. 63, No. 1, 18 September 1942: 120-121.
 - 11 *Ibid*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 1 March 1938: 7-9; Vol. 52, No. 4, 11 March 1938: 154-155; 17 March 1938: 351.
 - 12 *Ibid*, Vol. 52, No. 5, 25 March 1938: 372.
 - 13 Government of Bengal, Publicity Department, *Bengal Ministry and the Hindus of Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1940): 1-5.
 - 14 BLAP, Vol. 59, No. 3, 10 March 1941: 37-38.
 - 15 Memoirs of P. D. Martyn, Mss. Eur. F180/13, IOL.
 - 16 U. K. Ghosal, Office of the Employment Adviser, GB, to Maj. I. Stewart, Assistant Recruiting Officer, 31 October 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential, File No. W-222/41, Pt.(A), WBSA.
 - 17 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 23 February 1938.
 - 18 BLAP, Vol. 53, No. 3, 16 August 1938: 92-107.
 - 19 *Ibid*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 14 March 1939: 324.
 - 20 Government of Bengal, Publicity Department, *Two Years of Provincial Autonomy in Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1939): 32, 48, 80, 275.
 - 21 BLAP, Vol. 54, No. 3, 10 March 1939: 110-111.
- The recommendations made by the Scheduled Caste Education Committee for the allotment of Rs. 5 lakhs were as follows:

	Rupees
Scheduled Caste Hostel, Calcutta	150,000
Scheduled Caste Hostel, Barisal	30,000
Scheduled Caste Hostel, Comilla	20,000
Stipend to College students	80,000
Building grants to high English schools	75,000
Building grants to middle English schools	75,000
Semi-Famine grant to high English and middle English schools	50,000
Miscellaneous	20,000
Total	500,000

- 22 *Ibid*: Vol. 57, No. 5, 22 August 1940: 79-80.
- 23 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 12 September 1940.
- 24 *Ibid*: 18 March 1941.
- 25 BLAP, Vol. 60, No. 4, 3 September 1941: 109-111.
- 26 *Hindustan Standard*, 1 May 1941.

- 27 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 November 1937, 13 August 1940; *Hindustan Standard*, 12 April 1938.
- 28 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 March 1938; *Hindustan Standard*, 13 March, 15 March 1938.
- 29 *Hindustan Standard*, 18 March, 19 March 1938.
- 30 Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, (Namasudra Community and Bengal), (Calcutta, 1368 BS): 58.
- 31 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 April 1938.
- 32 Upendranath Barman, *Uttar Banglar Sekal O Amar Jibansmriti*, (The bygone days of north Bengal and my autobiography), (Jalpaiguri, 1392 BS): 74.
- 33 *Hindustan Standard*, 19 March 1938.
- 34 *Hindustan Standard*, 22 March 1938. The resolution was taken during the adjourned sitting on 27 March, see *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 March 1938.
- 35 *Hindustan Standard*, 27 March 1938.
- 36 *Ibid*: 1 May 1938.
- 37 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 April 1938.
- 38 *Liberty*, 18 February 1933.
- 39 For details, see GI, Home (Political), File Nos. 24/11/38-Poll; 13/5/39-Poll; 13/7/39-Poll, NAI.
- 40 *Hindustan Standard*, 7 July 1938.
- 41 *Ibid*: 20 July, 29 July 1938.
- 42 Eleanor Zelliot, 'Congress and the Untouchables, 1917-1950', in Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert, (eds), *Congress and Indian Nationalism: The Pre-Independence Phase*, (Delhi, 1988): 191.
- 43 GB, Home Dept., 'A Brief Summary of Political Events in the Province of Bengal during the year 1938', GI, Home (Political), File No. 66/40-Poll(I), NAI.
- 44 *Hindustan Standard*, 7 July 1938.
- 45 *Ibid*: 27 July, 7 August, 8 August 1938.
- 46 *BLAP*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 8 August 1938: 14-16.
- 47 *Ibid*: Vol. 53, No. 2, 10 August 1938: 118-124.
- 48 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, 120.
- 49 Out of these 31 MLAs, 23 had voted on the motion against Srish Chandra Nandi. Of them 16 had voted in favour of the motion and 7 against. See, *BLAP*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 8 August 1938: 14-16.
- 50 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 August 1938.
- 51 *Ibid*: 24 August 1938.
- 52 *Hindustan Standard*, 15 October 1938.
- 53 *Ibid*: 20 February 1939.
- 54 *Ibid*: 9 May 1939.
- 55 *Ibid*: 2 June 1939.
- 56 For details, see Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940*, (New York, London, 1974): 265-278.
- 57 Government of Bengal, Home Dept., *Brief Summary of Political Events in the Province of Bengal during the year 1940*, (Alipore, 1943): 7.
- 58 FR for the first half of March 1940 and second half of April 1940, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 30/40, WBSA.
- 59 For details, see Gitasree Bandyopadhyay, *Constraints in Bengal Politics, 1921-41: Gandhian Leadership*, (Calcutta, 1984), Chapter 6.

- 60 From Assistant Secy., BPCC, to General Secy., AICC, 31 October 1939, AICC Papers, File No. P-5, 1939-40, NMML.
- 61 FR for the first half of January 1940, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 30/40, WBSA.
- 62 *Hindustan Standard*, 16 August 1939.
- 63 *Ibid*: 14 June 1940.
- 64 Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, (Jogendranath, the noble soul), Vol. I, (Calcutta, 1382 BS): 49-50.
- 65 *Hindustan Standard*, 12 February 1941.
- 66 *Ibid*: 21 April 1941.
- 67 R. J. Moore, *Endgames of Empire: Studies of Britain's Indian Problem*, (Delhi, 1988): 123.
- 68 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, 128-129.
- 69 *BLAP*, Vol. 65, 5 July 1943: 42.
- 70 Telegram from Governor General to Secy. of State, 6 December 1941, GI, Home (Political), File No. 232/41-Poll (I), NAI.
- 71 FR for the second half of September 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.
- 72 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, 131-132.
- 73 FR for second half of October 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.
- 74 FR for second half of December 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.
- 75 Nazimuddin to Jinnah, 14 December 1941, GI, Home (Political), File No. 232/41-Poll(I), NAI.
- 76 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, 'The General Elections (1945-46), The Legislative Assembly - Bengal', 23 May 1946, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 106/3/45 - R, NAI.
- 77 *Hindustan Standard*, 16 December 1941.
- 78 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 17 January 1942.
- 79 *BLAP*, Vol. 65, 5 July 1943: 44.
- 80 *BLAP*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 19 March 1942: 160-164; No. 4, 25 March 1942: 41-43.
- 81 Apart from the three Independent Scheduled Caste MLAs, the three Congress Scheduled Caste MLAs, Rasiklal Biswas, Radhanath Das and Asutosh Mullick, also voted against the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill 1937, while the other Congress Scheduled Caste MLA, Patiram Roy voted in favour of the bill. See, *BLAP*, Vol. 51, No. 4, 24 September 1937: 1958-1960.
- 82 *BLAP*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 8 August 1938: 14-16. Patiram Roy this time also voted for the government, which indicates that he had evidently crossed the floor after the election of 1937.
- 83 *Hindustan Standard*, 3 February 1938; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 July 1937, 22 March 1938, 29 March 1938.
- 84 *Ibid*: 22 March 1938.
- 85 *Hindustan Standard*, 29 March 1938.
- 86 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8 September 1939.
- 87 *Ibid*: 16 November 1939.
- 88 *Ibid*: 23 January 1940.
- 89 *BLAP*, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2 August 1940: 83-84.
- 90 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 13 March 1942.

- 91 *Hindustan Standard*, 24 March 1942.
- 92 *Ibid*: 26 March 1942.
- 93 GI, Reforms Office, File No. 38/4/42-R, NAI.
- 94 GI, Reforms Office, File No. D709/42-R, NAI.
- 95 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 April 1942.
- 96 *Ibid*: 12 October 1942.
- 97 *Hindustan Standard*, 7 November 1942.
- 98 Jajneswar Mandal, letter to the editor, *Hindustan Standard*, 29 March 1938.
- 99 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 June, 11 July, 19 July 1937, 28 January, 14 February 1938.
- 100 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 July 1937; *Hindustan Standard*, 28 April 1941.
- 101 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 January, 18 February 1938; *Hindustan Standard*, 12 February 1938.
- 102 *Hindustan Standard*, 11 February, 3 April 1938.
- 103 *Ibid*: 26 April 1938.
- 104 *Ibid*: 15 May 1938.
- 105 *Ibid*: 5 November 1938
- 106 *Ibid*: 18 February, 2 June 1939.
- 107 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 13 August 1940.
- 108 *Hindustan Standard*, 27 February, 20 April 1938, 24 June 1939.
- 109 *Ibid*: 27 January 1938.
- 110 *Ibid*: 8 June 1939, 18 January 1942.
- 111 *Ibid*: 6 April, 27 April 1941; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 November 1939, 3 April, 2 June 1940.
- 112 *Hindustan Standard*, 2 June 1939.
- 113 See for example, *ibid*: 28 June, 29 June, 30 July, 17 September, 22 November 1938, 14 January, 15 February, 9 July 1939, 2 May 1940, 11 March, 26 April 1942; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 April, 17 September 1938, 29 August 1939, 13 March, 26 March 1940, 19 March, 6 May, 14 December 1941, 26 April, 28 September 1942.
- 114 Haridas Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmee*, (A worker among the backward castes of Bengal), (Calcutta, 1322 BS): 206.
- 115 *BLAP*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 17 March 1942: 98-100; 19 March 1942: 122-131.
- 116 *Ibid*: Vol. 62, No. 3, 23 March 1942: 324-339.
- 117 *Ibid*.
- 118 *Ibid*: Vol. 63, No. 1, 22 September 1942: 242-243; Vol. 63, No. 2, 28 September 1942.
- 119 GI, Home (Political) Internal, K.W. to File No. 4/3/42-Poll(I), NAI.
- 120 Last Message of Mahatma Gandhi, GI, Home (Political), File No. 3/31/42-Poll(I), NAI.
- 121 Instructions to P.C.Cs. from the A.I.C.C., *ibid*.
- 122 'Karmeeder Prati (Nikhil Bharat Rashtriya Samitir Nirdesh)', *ibid*.
- 123 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 August 1942.
- 124 'Report on the progress of the rebellion in Bengal for the months of August and September [1942] issued by the Council of Action of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee', GI, Home (Political), File No. 3/87/43-Poll(I), NAI.
- 125 From Bengal, Calcutta to Home, New Delhi, 6 November 1942, GI, Home (Political), File No. 3/15/1942-Poll(I), NAI.

- 126 Report of the Struggle for Independence in Bengal (October, November, December 1942) – The Council of Action, BPCC, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 253/43 (Col.3), WBSA.
- 127 'Record of Life in the Indian Civil Service', by F. O. Bell, 1930–47; Mss. Eur. F180/8, IOL.
- 128 See various confiscated leaflets and circulars in GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 12/43 (II), WBSA; and the bi-weekly reports on the movement sent from Bengal to New Delhi in GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 21/43, WBSA.
- 129 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14, 15, 18, 20 August 1942.
- 130 For details see Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, 137–142.
- 131 See Huq's statement in the Assembly in *BLAP*, Vol. 65, 5 July 1943: 56–57.
- 132 FRs for second half of March and first half of April 1943, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 39/43, WBSA.
- 133 'My Memoirs As A District Officer In Bengal During The Last Decade Of The British Raj' by S. Rahmatullah, Mss. Eur. F 180/14a, IOL.
- 134 FR on the Press for the second half of April 1943, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 39/43, WBSA.
- 135 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 September 1942.
- 136 Current Topics – 5.1.43 – Appendix 'A' – Objectionable Leaflet, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 12/43 (II), WBSA.
- 137 Provincial Press Adviser's Report on the Press for the first half of May 1943, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 39/43, WBSA.
- 138 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 August 1942.
- 139 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, 173, note 4.
- 140 Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 98.
- 141 Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, 56.
- 142 Memoirs of Indian Civil Service Officers, W. H. J. Christie, 17.2.76, Mss. Eur. F. 180/9a, IOL.
- 143 Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944*, (New York, 1982): 163, 177, 307–308.
- 144 *BLAP*, Vol. 65, 14 July 1943: 418–421.
- 145 Amartya Sen, 'Famine Mortality: A Study of the Bengal Famine of 1943', in E. J. Hobsbawm, et al., (eds.), *Peasants in History: Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner*, (Calcutta, 1980).
- 146 *BLAP*, Vol. 66, No. 2, 27 September 1943: 297–301.
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- 155 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, 'The General Elections (1945-46), The Legislative Assembly - Bengal', May 23, 1946, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 106/3/45-R, NAI.
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- 161 *BLAP*, Vol. 71, No. 3, 19 September 1946: 90, 20 September 1946: 168-169.
- 162 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 September 1946.
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- 178 Telegram No. 6679, 1 August 1946, from Governor General (I & A Dept.), New Delhi to Secy. of State for India, 'Weekly Political Appreciation Number One Hundred and Fiftyeight', GI, Home (Political), File No. 51/3/46-Poll(I), NAI.
- 179 *Ibid.*
- 180 'News from India: Political Situation', 14 January 1946, GI, Home (Political) File No. 51/2/46-Poll(I), NAI.
- 181 Harijan Sevak Sangh, Delhi, Monthly Letter for May 1946, AICC Papers, File No. G-25, 1940-46, NMML.
- 182 Interview with Satyabrata Mazumdar in Calcutta on 14 February 1989.
- 183 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, 222-223; also see *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 16 October 1946.
- 184 GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/26/47-R, NAI.
- 185 Eleanor Zelliot, 'Congress and the Untouchables, 1917-1950', 193-194.

7 FROM ALIENATION TO INTEGRATION, 1937-47: THE PEASANTS

- 1 *Hindustan Standard*, 24 July 1938.
- 2 FR for District Faridpur for period ending 22 March 1943, Section III: Communal, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 39/43, WBSA.
- 3 A number of treatises appeared in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries to popularise these notions of patriarchy. See for example, Anonymous, *Hindu Dharmaniti*, (Religious principles of the Hindus), (Calcutta, 1794 Saka): 83.
- 4 *Matua Sangeet*, (Songs of the Matua sect), Part I, compiled by Matua Mahasangha, (Sixth edition, Thakurnagar, 1397 BS): 35.
- 5 'Satee nari bhabe je jan, Puja kare patir charan.'
'Meyer sadhan bhajan nai . . . thakte swami bartamane'.
Matua Sangeet, 109-111.
- 6 'Age jadi jantem ami, eto garal e ramani,
Phele giye omni kortem gurur dhyam.'
[If I had known earlier that woman is full of so much poison, I would have discarded her and immersed in thoughts only of guru.]
Matua Sangeet, 79.
- 7 See, Tanika Sarkar, 'Politics and Women in Bengal: The Conditions and Meaning of Participation',
The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1984.
- 8 'Gururupe Hari tumi, ese samsare,
Tumi Hari hoye Hari bole, nam dila sakalare'.
Matua Sangeet, 65.

- 9 Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita*, (An account of the life and teachings of Harichand), (Faridpur, 1323 BS): 292–293; Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, (Philosophy of Matua religion), (Thakurnagar, 1393 BS): 140, 150–151; Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Tattwa Sar*, (The substance of Matua religious theories), (Thakurnagar, 1393 BS): 39.
- 10 Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1985): 78–79.
- 11 Paramananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Darshan*, vi–vii; Nityananda Haldar, *Srihari Darshan*, (Philosophy of Harichand), (Thakurnagar, 1392 BS): 113.
- 12 For these concepts, see Chapter 2. For devotional songs indicating this trend, see, *Matua Sangeet*, 8–9, 51, 60–61, 113, 117, 120–121; Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Mahasankirtan*, (Collection of devotional songs), (Ninth edition, Thakurnagar, 1394 BS): 75; Aswini Kumar Sarkar, *Sri Sri Hari Sangeet*, (The songs of Lord Hari), (Tenth edition, Thakurnagar, 1395 BS): 18–19, 23.
- 13 'Guru Gosainr daya habe, karmabandhan jabe ghuche'.
[If the guru gosain is kind enough, the worldly bondage will disappear]
'Jadi jabi opar, kar Sriguru kandari, harinamer taree'.
[If you want to sail across to the other world, make *Harinam* your boat and accept guru as the boatman.]
'Srigurur bakya dharo, anitya tarka chhado, Edeha sukshma karo, jabe bhabe chinte.'
[Have faith in the words of guru and do not indulge in argumentation. Concentrate on your finer body (i.e., soul) and you will get rid of your worldly worries.]
Aswini Kumar Sarkar, *Sri Sri Hari Sangeet*, 17, 23
- 14 'Michhe mayar akinchane, majiye kamini-kanchane;
Ami apni jwale papagune, apan prane dagdha hoi.'
[Lured by women and wealth, which are all trivial and illusory, I have burnt myself in the fire of sin; it burns my heart.]
'Ami bhaber abhajan, na jani tomari sadhan,
Mayarase matta hoye harechhi bishay bish grahan.'
[I am an unfortunate person in this world; I do not know how to appease you. Having been duped by maya, I have taken the poison called material wealth.]
'Kamini kuhak rase, magna hoye achhi bose,
Sadhan bhajan habe kise, bhulechhi mayay.'
[I have been possessed by the mysterious influence of women. I do not know how I would undertake my spiritual duties, as I have been bemused by maya.]
'Michhe rajak kanchan, e dhana jauban,
Gurur pade samarpan kariba ekhan.'
[Wealth and youth are all false; I shall now surrender everything at the feet of the guru.]
Matua Sangeet, 51, 78, 113, 117.
- 15 H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, (Reprint, Calcutta, 1981), Vol. I: 187.
- 16 'Some Aspects of Popular Hinduism [Dacca]', File 32 mis. D, Paper No. 26, Diary No. 341, Risley Papers, Vol. 6, Mss. Eur. E. 295, IOL.
- 17 D. A. Davidson, 'The New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society in India 1890–1974', Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1974: 15.

- 18 Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, (Namasudra community and Bengal), (Calcutta, 1368 BS): 14; translation author's.
- 19 Gurudas Ray, *Asprisyer Marmabedana*, (The sorrows of the untouchables), published by Hindu Mission Bani Mandir, (Calcutta, n.d.), [1933]: 10.
- 20 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 April 1938; *Hindustan Standard*, 21 June 1938.
- 21 Swami Vedananda, *Sri Sri Jugacharyya Jiban Charit*, (A biography of the great teacher [Pranabananda]), (Calcutta, 1398 BS): 355, 379-386.
- 22 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 March 1941.
- 23 Letters to the Editor, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 December 1939.
- 24 Extract from All India Hindu Mahasabha – Twenty first session, 2nd day's sitting at Deshbandhu Park Pandal on 29.12.'39, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 394/41, WBSA.
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- 29 Mohan Lal Mandal, President, Dacca Namasudra Samity, to Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, 29 June 1946, Shyama Prosad Mukherjee Papers, II-IV Instalment, Correspondence, Serial No. 849, NMML.
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- 31 *Hindustan Standard*, 15 March 1938.
- 32 Special Report case No. 8-38, Report Ist, 4 May 1938; Copy of Magura PS., F.I.R. No. 12, 28.4.38, u/s, 148 I.P.C., Forwarding Note by H.L.Saha, SP., Jessore; Copy of Magura PS., F.I.R.No. 13, 28.4.38, u/s. 148/324 I.P.C., GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 248/38, WBSA.
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- 34 Telegram from President, Namasudra Association to Mukunda Behari Mullick, 30 April 1938, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 248/38, WBSA.
- 35 Sasadhar Mandal, President, Faridpur District Namasudra Association and the Depressed Classes Association, Faridpur, to the Private Secy. to the Governor of Bengal, 5 May 1938, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 248/38, WBSA.
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- 37 Special Report Case No. III, Report dated 21 May 1938; Copy of Progress Report submitted by C.I. Magura in Magura PS. Case No. 12, 29.4.38, u/s. 148 I.P.C. and connected cases, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 248/38, WBSA.
- 38 Copy of Report submitted by C.I., Narail, in connection with the recent rioting cases of this district, *op. cit.*
- 39 Commissioner, Presidency Divn. to Chief Secy., Bengal, 6 May 1938, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 248/38, WBSA.

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- 42 FR, Presidency Divn. – Period ending 25 April 1940, Part 3, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 30/40, WBSA.
- 43 FR, Presidency Divn. – Period ending 12 August 1940 and 27 August 1940, Part 3, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 30/40, WBSA.
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- 54 M. H. Ali to A. S. Hands, Commissioner, Presidency Divn., 31 May 1944, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA.
- 55 Report of the DM, Khulna, 28 May 1944, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA.
- 56 Commissioner, Presidency Divn., to Addnl. Secy., GB, Home, 30 June 1944, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA.
- 57 'Report by the Commissioner, Presidency Division on allegation against the conduct of the Police and local officers in connection with the communal riots in Mollahat P.S. on 26th May 1944 and subsequently', GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA. Incidentally, it was at this Gayen family house that the first Namasudra meeting was addressed by Guruchand Thakur in 1881. The head of the family then was Ishwar Gayen, whose son Bhawani Sankar eventually married the daughter of Sashi Bhushan Thakur, the eldest son of Guruchand and the father of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. See, Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, (A biography of Guruchand), (Calcutta, 1943): 114.
- 58 'Report by the Commissioner, Presidency Division on allegations against the conduct of the Police and local officers in connection with the communal riots in Mollahat P.S. on 26th May 1944 and subsequently', *op.cit.*
- 59 Extracts from Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA.
- 60 A. Ahmed, SDO, Bagerhat to M. H. Ali, DM, Khulna, 6 June 1944, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA.

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- 63 Deputy Inspector General of Police, Presidency Range, to Inspector General of Police, Bengal, 21 July 1944, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA.
- 64 'Report by the Commissioner, Presidency Division on allegations against the conduct of Police and local officers in connection with the communal riots in Mollahat P.S. on 26 May 1944 and subsequently', *op. cit.*
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- 74 Joya Chatterji, *Bengal divided: Hindu communalism and partition, 1932–1947*, (Cambridge, 1995): 200–202.
- 75 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 29 September 1946; for further details on Calcutta and Noakhali riots, see Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905–1947*, 161–206.
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